

AFTER PARIS: JUSTICE, NOT VENGEANCE

THE EDITORS

THE Nation.

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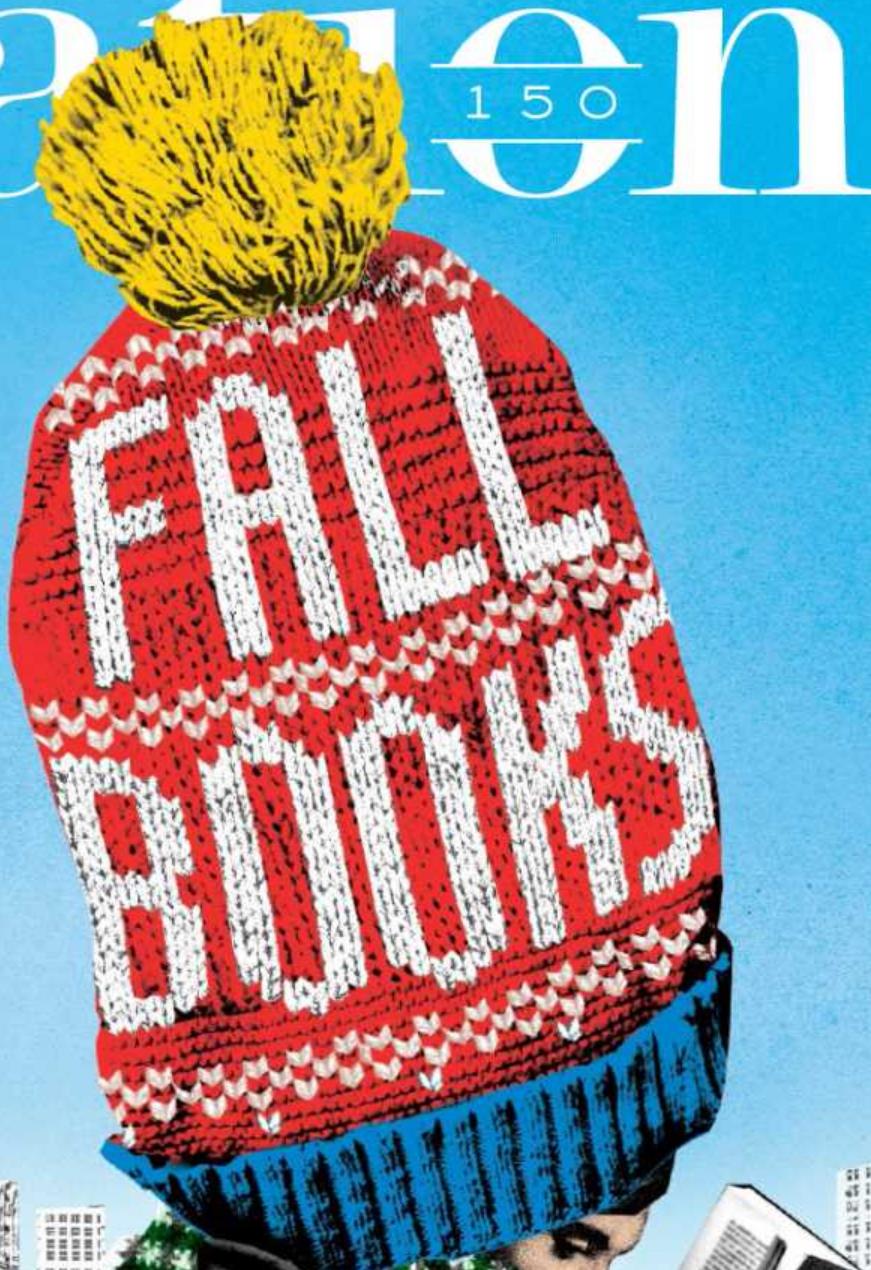
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Letters

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Quantum of Science

Marilynne Robinson ["Humanism," Nov. 9] seems to misunderstand what scientists do. Unanswerable questions are the province of philosophy and religion; science is limited to answerable questions, in the sense that reasonable people can eventually agree that experiments favor one answer over another. Obviously, both types of question are important to people. (Which category the untestable theories of modern cosmology fall into is debatable.) Whether the soul, or nonphysical "self," is real is an unanswerable question, but Robinson wants neuroscientists to address it. That is not their job.

Sometimes scientists replace a difficult question with an easier one; this is called "reductionism." For Robinson, this is tantamount to genocide, but for most of us it is simply a strategy for approaching difficult problems. Deferring the difficult parts is not the same as denial. Trying to understand an average brain before Shakespeare's is merely common sense.

At least since the 1944 publication of Schrödinger's book *What Is Life?*, people have considered the possibility that quantum mechanics may be important for understanding brain function (Schrödinger thought not)—but, thus far, this has not been a productive line of inquiry. Classical physics often provides useful insights into things as small as molecules and atoms, so the need for neuroscientists to use quantum mechanics is not at all obvious.

Neuroscientists use the working assumption that the "self" can be understood as a by-product of brain function. This may turn out to be wrong (or right), but it is the most viable scientific approach. When neuroscientists finally devise a precise neural definition of the self (which I don't expect anytime soon), then we can judge whether it enhances our

self-understanding or falls short of the mark, and whether it reduces us to soulless automata or raises automata to the level of humanity.

PAUL KIENKER
WHITE PLAINS, N.Y.

"I am content to place humankind at the center of Creation," writes Marilynne Robinson. Six paragraphs later, she finally comes out with it: "I am a atheist"—the real climax of the tale, as artfully cadenced as only a fiction writer of Robinson's skill can do. "It seems science may never find a way to confirm or reject the idea of multiple universes," she continues, "or to arrive at a satisfactory definition of time or gravity." Einstein said that the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible. Give science time, Marilynne Robinson, give it time.

JOEL R. SOLONCHE
BLOOMING GROVE, N.Y.

Misreading Progress

In his article "Philanthrocapitalism: A Self-Love Story" [Oct. 19], David Rieff cites the ranking of Rwanda on the Social Progress Index to suggest that our assessment of the social performance of nations must be flawed, as we scored it near the bottom of our list of nations, in contrast to the opinion of some in the "development community," he writes, who hold Rwanda as an exemplar of development in Africa.

Sadly, Rieff's critique is out of date. He cites obsolete data from the "beta" version of the Social Progress Index released in 2013. In the 2015 iteration of the index—our latest—we assess the social progress of 133 countries and rank Rwanda 10th of 32 nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 109th overall. We find that it performs better than its economic strength would predict

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The Nation.

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Fourteen years ago, immediately after the Al Qaeda terror attacks in the United States on September 11, the French daily *Le Monde* published a headline that perfectly expressed the sentiments of grief, shock, and solidarity that so many around the world felt at the time: *Nous sommes tous Américains*

(We are all Americans). In the wake of the Islamic State's terror attacks on Paris, many of those same feelings flooded the world media, this time for the City of Light (a wave soon followed by rueful acknowledgment that earlier ISIS atrocities, from Beirut to Baghdad and Aden to Ankara, had elicited far less sympathy in the Global North). Adding to the shock this time was the horrifying realization that these terrorists, in targeting random civilians at a sports event, concert, cafes, and restaurants, were attacking not simply a city or a country but the very idea of pleasure, diversity, conviviality—an assault on so much of what makes life worth living.

But just as in the United States in the weeks after 9/11, all too many politicians and pundits on both sides of the Atlantic cried out for war and vengeance, demanded draconian new policing and surveillance powers, and insisted on an end to accepting more refugees. French President François Hollande, vowing that “France will be pitiless against the barbarians” of ISIS, went so far as to invoke Article 42.7 of the European Union treaty, which stipulates that all EU nations are obliged to come to the aid of a fellow member who is the “victim of armed aggression.”

Republicans and other critics in the United States used the tragedy to attack the Obama administration’s Syria policy, without offering coherent alternatives. Perhaps most despicable was the backlash against those fleeing the civil war, with more than two dozen Republican governors announcing that their states would no longer accept Syrian refugees. Several GOP presidential candidates, echoing the neoconservative pundits, seemed to be in a competition to see who could be the most Islamophobic. There’s plenty to criticize regarding President Obama’s Syria policy, but in his press conference in Turkey, the president was scathing, and admirable,



on this point: “When I hear folks say that, well, maybe we should just admit the Christians but not the Muslims; when I hear political leaders suggesting that there would be a religious test for which a person who’s fleeing from a war-torn country is admitted... that’s shameful. That’s not American.... We don’t have religious tests to our compassion.”

The Islamophobia is racist, of course, but it also plays right into the hands of ISIS, as does the war fever. The terror group has been quite clear that its strategy is to eliminate what it calls the “grayzone” where Muslims and non-Muslims live in harmony. It aims to provoke Western governments into clamping down on their own Muslim populations, the better to drive them into ISIS’s arms. In its magazine *Dabiq*, ISIS applauded George W. Bush’s post-9/11 language: “Bush spoke the truth when he said, ‘Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.’ I.e. either you are with the crusade or you are with Islam.” *Les extrêmes se touchent*.

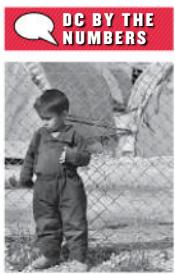
Obama also sharply rebutted demands that he somehow solve what has become the world’s most intractable conflict, pointing out the immense complications of imposing a no-fly zone on Syria, and observing that while a US invasion could probably rout ISIS from its strongholds temporarily, without a local population “pushing back against ideological extremes,” the terrorists would resurface as soon as American forces left. Years of bitter experience demonstrate that US military intervention in the Middle East has done more to provoke extremism than to stanch it. It was the US invasion of Iraq, after all, that led directly to the birth of ISIS. The terrorists know this, which is why they’re doing everything they can to drive the West into deeper military engagement.

Regarding another crucial driver of not only the Syrian civil war but Islamist extremism throughout

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**4M**

Syrians who have fled their country since 2011

10K

Syrian refugees that the Obama administration proposes to resettle in the United States in fiscal year 2016

\$1.2B

Estimated cost of Obama's re-settlement plan

\$5B

Cost of the military campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq since August 2014

"I don't think orphans under 5... should be admitted into the United States at this point."

Chris Christie,
New Jersey
governor and
Republican
presidential
candidate

the region, the president's policy—like those of previous administrations and most Western governments, including France—has been disastrous. This would be Washington's close, decades-long alliance with the Wahhabi regime in Saudi Arabia. As Laila Lalami points out below, no force has done more to fund Islamist extremism in the Muslim world than Saudi Arabia. These so-called allies of ours, along with other Gulf kingdoms and the seemingly more moderate Islamist government of Turkey, have showered jihadi groups among the Syrian rebels with arms and money, to the point that they are now the only significant armed forces opposing the Assad regime.

There is one ray of light amid the carnage: The attacks have given urgency to international negotiations to end the war in Syria. Russian and US leaders seem to have finally realized that unless they cooperate diplomatically to resolve the conflict, it could destroy the entire region—and continue to spread beyond it. Before the latest round of talks in Vienna, Washington sensibly abandoned its insistence on excluding Iran, as well as its demand that Assad's immediate departure be a condition of the talks. There are immense hurdles to overcome, but at least both countries now know that as long as this conflict lasts, ISIS will only grow stronger.

Justice for Paris

Western and Muslim leaders must be called to account.

What happened in Paris on November 13 has happened before: in a shopping district of Beirut on November 12, in the skies over Egypt on October 31, at a cultural center in Turkey on July 20, at a beach resort in Tunisia on June 26—and nearly every day in Syria for the last four years.

The scenario is by now familiar to us all. News of the killings will appear on television and radio. There will be cries of horror and sorrow, a few hashtags on Twitter, perhaps even a change of avatars on Facebook. Our leaders will make staunch promises to bring the terrorists to justice, while also claiming greater power of surveillance over their citizens. And then life will resume exactly as before.

Except for the victims' families. For them, time will split into a "before" and "after." We owe these families, of every race, creed, and nationality, more than sorrow, more than anger. We owe them justice.

We must call to account the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), a nihilistic death cult that sees the world in black and white, with no shades of gray in between. We must call to account Bashar al-Assad, whose response to peaceful protests in the spring of 2011 was to greet them with tanks and water cannons. We must call to account the governments of the United States, France, Britain, Russia, Iran, and many others, who lent support and succor to tyrant after tyrant in the Middle East and North Africa, and whose interventions appear to create 10 terrorists for every one they kill. We must call to account George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, whose disastrous invasion of Iraq

COMMENT

in 2003 and subsequent disbanding of the Iraqi Army destabilized the entire region.

We must also call to account the Saudi kings—Salman, Abdullah, and Fahd—whose funding of Wahhabi doctrine gave rise to the scourge of Islamic extremism.

When I was a child in Morocco, no clerics told me what to do, what to read (or not read), what to believe, or what to wear. And even if they had done so, I was free not to listen: Faith was more than its conspicuous outward manifestations. But things began to change in the 1980s. It was the height of the Cold War, and Arab tyrants saw an opportunity: They could hold on to power indefinitely by repressing the dissidents in their midst—most of them secular leftists—and by encouraging the religious right wing, with tacit or overt approval from the United States and other Western allies.

Into the void created by the decimation of the Arab world's secular left, the Wahhabis stepped in, with almost unlimited financial resources. Wahhabi ideas spread throughout the region not because they had any merit—they don't—but because their dissemination was and remains amply funded. We cannot defeat ISIS without defeating the Wahhabi theology that birthed it. And to do so would require spending as much money and effort in defending liberal ideas.

I am a novelist. Every year, I spend a great deal of my time giving readings or lectures at which, almost unfailingly, I am asked about Islam and Muslims and the wars now consuming the Middle East. I try to explain and contextualize, to remind people about history and politics, to bring some art and culture into the mix. But every couple of months, when another terrorist attack happens, the work I do seems to be for nothing. What chance does someone like me have when compared with the power of well-funded networks?

The beheadings, the crucifixions, the destruction of cultural heritage that ISIS practices—none of these are new. They all happened, and continue to happen, in Saudi Arabia as well. This year, the government of Saudi Arabia has beheaded more people than ISIS. It persecutes Shiites and atheists. It has slowly destroyed sites of cultural and religious significance around Mecca and Medina. To almost universal indifference, it has been bombing Yemen for seven months. Yet whenever terror strikes, it escapes notice and evades responsibility. In this, it is aided and abetted by Western governments, who buy oil from tyrants and sell them weapons, while paying lip service to human rights.

I have no patience anymore for people who claim that

Nation Awards

The Nation congratulates the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II on receiving the Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship. The award honors his brave leadership on civil rights, including as president of the North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP. We are pleased that Reverend Barber will be writing a series of dispatches for *The Nation* about the contemporary struggle for racial justice and civil rights, just as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did for the magazine during the 1960s.

Q&A LAURIE ANDERSON

Multimedia artist Laurie Anderson collaborated with Mohammed el Gharani on *Habeas Corpus*, a three-day performance at New York's Park Avenue Armory this fall.

El Gharani was seized at age 14 and held for nearly eight years at the Guantánamo Bay detention facility without charge. For the show, he was beamed in via telepresence from where he now lives in West Africa.

—Laura Flanders

Laura Flanders: You originally tried to do this kind of telepresence project with prisoners from upstate New York. What happened?

Laurie Anderson: We worked on it for several months. We talked to lots of wardens; a lot of the prisons were interested in doing it. Homeland Security let us know that we would not be doing this project, ever.

LF: Why?

LA: It wasn't clear. I think the real reason is, it's not in their control—and prison, of course, is about control and surveillance and not breaking down the walls between the prison and the outside world. So this became a work very much about borders and walls and what it is to jump a border.

LF: There isn't a wall that keeps your collaborator, Mohammed el Gharani, out of the US. He was never charged. He was released. Why can't he be here?

LA: All Guantánamo former detainees are barred from coming to the US. The legal language in this is "barred,"

"banned"—there are a couple of other words involved. My work is words and stories and how they're told, so this, for me, is fascinating. The first thing [the Bush administration] did was to treat Guantánamo detainees as nonpersons. Also, one of the directives when Guantánamo was founded was to find something called a "legal outer space." A place where our laws don't apply.... People were committing suicide until suddenly, wow, the suicide rates dropped! However, suicide was simultaneously redefined: It was called a "manipulative self-injurious behavior." Now there were lots of people who died of manipulative self-injurious behavior, but no suicides. Bingo. Language is operating in a very, very heavy way.

LF: How did Mohammed learn English?

LA: Mohammed learned English in prison, and the first two words he learned were the F-word and the N-word, because people called him that.... He was also helped by a number of people there, primarily Shaker Aamer, who is a British resident and probably came on the same plane that Mohammed did to Guantánamo. Shaker's a very, very articulate person. He was able to really speak for the detainees. [Editor's note: Aamer was released and returned to the UK this October.]

LF: You visited Mohammed and went with him to one of the main ports for the Atlantic slave trade.

LA: Yeah, Mohammed's a survivor. He'll never really recover, but he did survive this. He's married, he has two kids. He became very interested in the treatment of black people.... The slave trade really started in 1482, and the route was the same: from Africa through the Gold Coast to the Caribbean—600 years, millions of slaves have passed through, and it's still going on. Mohammed asked our guide so many questions: How tight were the shackles? Were their arms up or were they down? Were they able to lie down? What were the shackles made of? Here's a guy who walked with shackles for almost eight years, so he couldn't really walk. It's one thing to read about it, and it's another thing to be right next to someone...

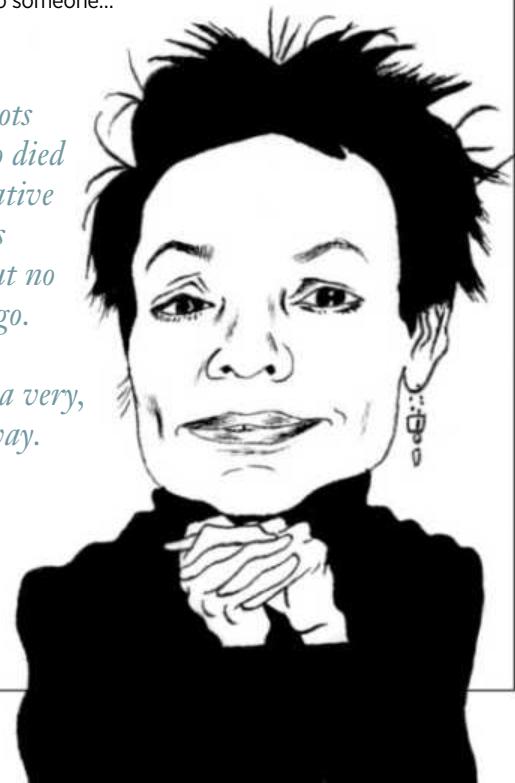
There were lots of people who died of "manipulative self-injurious behavior," but no suicides. Bingo. Language is operating in a very, very heavy way.

LF: You've used technology in your work for years—what are your thoughts about technology and our humanity?

LA: We blame technology for a lot of things. It's just plastic, and I don't think it makes us meaner or nicer or more creative. You can make a very dangerous work with a pencil, and you can be really mean with just your fists.

LF: You asked Mohammed what would be justice for him. What did he say?

LA: Yes. He said an apology... what if Obama in his last moments said, "You know, we made some mistakes. We rounded up a bunch of people, we kept them, we tortured them, we never charged them, habeas corpus was thrown out the window; I'm really sorry. I'm so sorry we did that." ■



Adapted from Anderson's appearance on The Laura Flanders Show, on teleSUR English.



FACT CHECK

The Forgotten Massacre

Most news coverage has pronounced the recent terror attacks in France the country's worst loss of life since the end of World War II. But in between those years was a massacre that's been little discussed. In 1961, 30,000 Algerians marched peacefully in Paris to demand an end to France's colonialist war in their country. The demonstrators were attacked by riot police, who murdered at least 40 (and probably closer to 200). Dead bodies were thrown into the Seine, as well as some live ones—those of people beaten unconscious and left to drown.

The massacre was never acknowledged by the French state until 1998. Sadly, the tangled history of French colonialism was still present on November 13, when the attackers and their victims included people of Algerian origin or parentage.

Muslims do not speak out. They do, every day. Muslims are the primary victims of ISIS, and its primary resisters. It is an insult to every one of the hundreds of thousands of Muslim victims of terrorism to lump them with the lunatics who commit terror. The truth is that ISIS unleashes its nihilistic violence on anyone—Muslim, Christian, or Jew; believer or unbeliever—who doesn't subscribe to its cult.

I wish I could do something for the victims of terrorist violence. But I am a writer; words are all I have. And all I know is that I want, with all my heart, to preserve and celebrate what ISIS wishes to destroy: a multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural life.

LAILA LALAMI

*Laila Lalami is the author, most recently, of *The Moor's Account*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She is a professor of creative writing at the University of California, Riverside.*

The Climate in Paris

Grassroots momentum, at home and abroad.

The United States' military strategy has long been predicated on being able to fight two wars at once. Now the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris, just weeks before the French capital hosts a landmark international climate-change summit, will test whether the world as a whole can address two crises at once. Massacring innocent civilians is never justified and calls for a range of responses: grief for the victims and their loved ones; solidarity with all who condemn such heinous acts; bringing to justice the immediate perpetrators; and unravelling the deeper causes of such violence. These necessities, however, must not be allowed to distract the world's governments, media, or citizens from the equally urgent task of reversing our collective march toward climate chaos.

Dooming young people and future generations (not to mention other species) to an unlivable planet is no more justified than killing innocent civilians is, and it too demands a range of responses, starting with compassion for the victims. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders is correct to link the Syrian refugee crisis to climate change (as US national security officials and scientists have long done). ExxonMobil and other perpetrators of climate denial should be brought to justice. World leaders should agree in Paris to leave most of earth's remaining fossil fuels in the ground, as the latest science dictates. Such a goal requires launching the most rapid possible transition to "100 percent clean energy for all," as activists have urged. Humanity has the tools needed to exit the Carbon Age and build a sustainable future; what's required are dramatically different political and economic choices.

COMMENT

Dooming young people and future generations to an unlivable planet is no more justifiable than killing innocent civilians.

Insisting that the power to fight climate change resides not only in the corridors of global elites but also in ordinary people in the streets, activists had planned a huge march through Paris on November 29 to greet heads of state arriving for the two-week summit, along with sister marches in cities around the world. The terrorist attacks threw plans for that march into question; French authorities worried that large numbers of people streaming through the streets of Paris would be difficult to protect. Negotiations between the government and Coalition Climate 21, the alliance coordinating activism around the Paris summit, were in stalemate as *The Nation* went to press. "We can think of few better responses to violence and terror than this movement's push for peace and hope," said Alice Jay, of the group Avaaz, a member of the coalition. "No matter the final plans for the march in Paris, we urge people to join other global climate marches around the world to show their solidarity and support."

For his part, Barack Obama heads to Paris as a credible (though hardly perfect) climate leader because he has been pressured by increasingly visible and disruptive activism. Grassroots protests both pushed and created the political space for the president to reject the Keystone XL pipeline this month. But the League of Conservation Voters' controversial early endorsement of Hillary Clinton for president illustrates that the US climate movement remains divided between a grassroots wing, which has been winning victories such as Keystone by disrupting politics as usual, and the "Big Green" groups like the LCV, headquartered in Washington, DC, which favor working within the status quo to achieve the best outcome available.

Keystone is not the only feather in Obama's climate cap, and the president himself deserves credit for two particular achievements. The diplomatic breakthrough he reached with China last year is genuinely historic. Not only does the agreement commit the world's two climate superpowers to slash heat-trapping emissions and super-accelerate clean-energy development; it also makes possible an international agreement in Paris by breaking the US-China stalemate that doomed previous summits. Obama may also be the only major head of state to publicly affirm that most fossil fuels must be left in the ground, saying in a 2014 interview, "We're not going to be able to burn it all."

But words are one thing, deeds another, and rejecting Keystone was a mighty deed. "A head of state has never rejected a major fossil fuel project because of its climate impacts before," wrote Bill McKibben, co-founder of the grassroots group

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TOWERS
STERLING
WORK."

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"BRYAN CRANSTON IS
A POWERHOUSE.
JOHN GOODMAN IS
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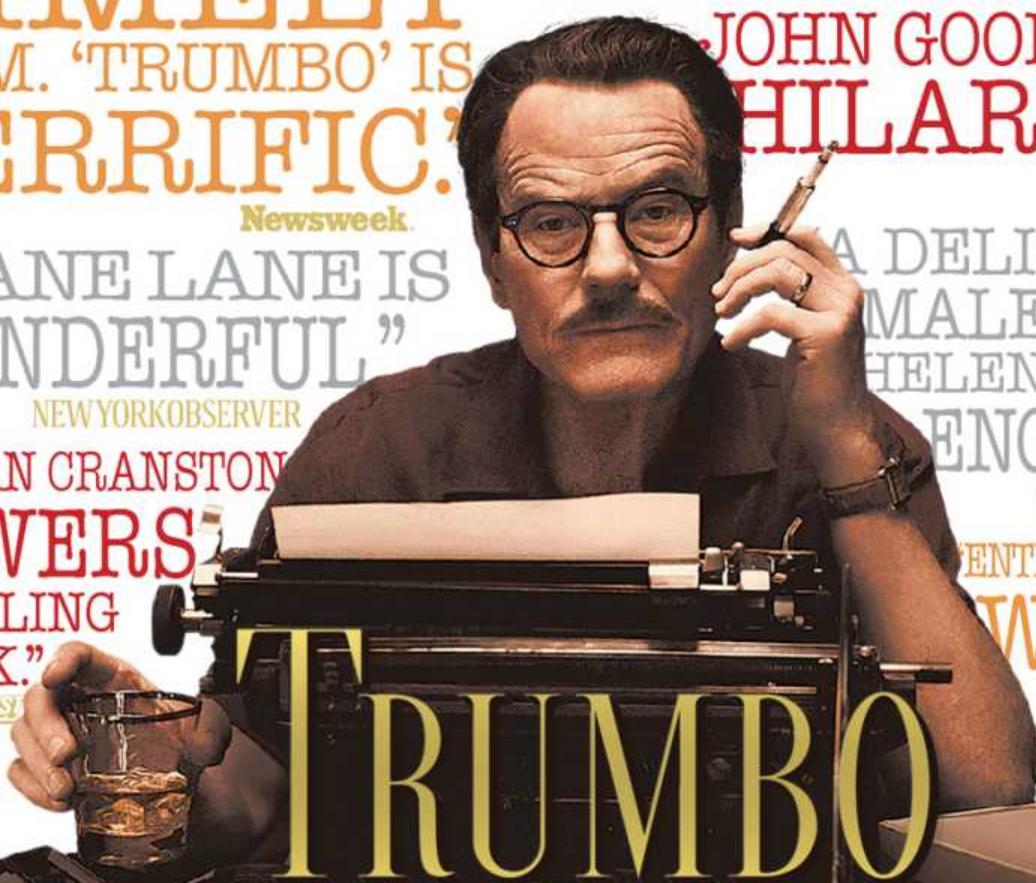
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CLIMATE CONFLICT

Environment for Terror

The conflict in Syria has become a brutal proxy war with many sides, leading to about 11 million displaced people, four million of whom have fled the country altogether.

In March 2011, when peaceful protests began in Syria, the country had already suffered three years of a punishing drought thought by many to have its origin in climate change.

That drought wreaked havoc on food production and on millions of livelihoods. Desperate farmers moved into the cities, increasing the competition for jobs there. About 1.5 million people were internally displaced, adding to the country's social upheaval.

Would the war in Syria have broken out without global warming? That, of course, is impossible to say. But we can no longer ignore the ways in which our failure to combat climate change contributes to a climate that is ripe for terror.

350.org, of Obama's decision. (In truth, climate change was one of four reasons that Obama gave. The first three were: Keystone would not increase oil supplies, lower gas prices, or create more than a handful of long-term jobs.)

Grassroots activists quickly claimed credit for the victory, and rightly so. Would anyone seriously argue that the White House would have killed Keystone in the absence of mass civil disobedience and the other in-your-face tactics that made it a litmus test for a politician's seriousness about fighting climate change? Would anyone argue the same about the Keystone reversal of Hillary Clinton, who as secretary of state said that she was "inclined" to support the pipeline, and whose State Department issued favorable assessments written by a consultant nominated by the pipeline company itself?

Clearly, most Big Green groups can claim little credit: They disparaged the strategy of growing a grassroots movement by targeting Keystone, and some even joined the inside-the-Beltway political class's dismissal of Keystone as a distraction from the truly important battles.

Similar strategic differences underlie the explosive backlash that greeted the LCV's November 9 announcement that it was endorsing Clinton for president. "This is either shameless pandering or incredible naivete," complained one of the more than 850 posts to bombard the LCV's Facebook page in the 48 hours after the news broke. A second post ridiculed its description of Clinton as "a leader who will stand up to Big Polluters," asking, "Did you take this post from [the satirical website] The Onion?" More than a few huffed that they would never again donate to the LCV, an organization founded in 1969 that became one of the environmental community's first sources of hard-money campaign contributions. Historically, the LCV has funded mainly Democrats, but also the occasional Republican; in 2012, it backed Obama and spent more than \$36 million at the federal, state, and local levels.

Speaking on background to maintain their working relationships with the LCV, many leading climate activists echoed the Facebook fury. Why choose Clinton, some asked, over Sanders, who "opposed Keystone from day one," as the Vermont senator frequently points out, and advocates for a much faster shift to 100 percent clean energy than Clinton does? But most critics focused their comments on Clinton's record, noting that Big Oil has long been a contributor to her electoral campaigns and is even "bundling" for her in 2016. (Bundling involves soliciting contributions from like-minded individuals and delivering them en masse, thus signaling the candidate how much a given interest group has donated.) As a senator, Clinton supported off-shore drilling (though she announced her opposition to Arctic drilling in August). She has also long supported fracking, and her State Department worked hard to spread fracking overseas.

In any case, why endorse Clinton so early, be-

fore a single primary has been held, and when two rival candidates and grassroots pressure are pushing her toward stronger positions? More than one critic speculated that the endorsement was pushed through by Carol Browner, chair of the LCV board, who served as the Environmental Protection Agency's administrator under Bill Clinton.

Asked if LCV expected such harsh criticism, Tiernan Sittenfeld, LCV's vice president for government affairs, chuckled, paused, and answered a different question. "We feel lucky to have a number of candidates on the Democratic side who have strong records," she told *The Nation*. LCV's endorsement is "not about Bernie Sanders, it's about Hillary Clinton," Sittenfeld continued. When asked, therefore, about Clinton's support for fracking and off-shore drilling and Big Oil's contributions, she neither disputed nor defended these aspects of Clinton's record. She replied that Clinton had "a strong voting record" in the Senate, "did a lot on energy and climate issues" as secretary of state, and "was in the White House for eight years as first lady." This combination of experience and "passion for addressing the climate crisis" makes Clinton the best choice "both to defeat her eventual Republican opponent, who will inevitably be a climate-change denier, and to hit the ground running on day one in the Oval Office."

"There are a number of exceptional folks at LCV, but it is terribly troubling at this moment in our planetary history to have a group so clearly adhering to a theory of change based on incrementalism and access," responded one senior climate activist. "I know our movement needs to play both an inside game [in Washington] and an outside game [at the grassroots]. But if we really do the math, as Bill [McKibben] points out, we all know that we must transcend the current laudable but entirely inadequate policy agenda put forth by our Big Green colleagues and their political allies. We must push for what seems impossible, just as we did with Keystone, when some in our community consistently said that it was the wrong fight to pick. But we pushed and redefined the terms of the debate, and we won."

Redefining the terms of the debate is essential to defusing the climate crisis and the terrorist challenge alike. Entrenched forces and beliefs must be confronted; solidarity and the common good must take precedence over prejudice and selfishness; our children's future must matter more than past hatreds. Transcending these two scourges will not be easy, immediate, or assured, but the more people who join the effort, the better our chances. The coming days in Paris, and the years beyond, will reveal how well we have met the challenge.

MARK HERTSGAARD

Mark Hertsgaard, The Nation's environment correspondent, is the author of HOT: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth.

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GOP OMG

BOZO THE CANDIDATE



The leaders in the GOP presidential primary have debated a wide array of issues.

Trump
24%

of the GOP vote
“The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive.”



Carson
23%

“Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority and Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, were both classmates in the class of 1968 at Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, where they became acquainted with a young Vladimir Putin.”



Rubio
14%

“Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers.”



Cruz
13%

“When millions of Americans rose up against Planned Parenthood, I was proud to lead that fight.”

Eric Alterman



Send in the Clowns

The crazier the Republican candidates sound, the more popular they become.

The essential mystery of American politics is this: How is it that the Republicans have succeeded in laying the groundwork for long-term dominance at the very moment they have allowed their party to be captured by an irrational, irredentist faction with virtually no concern for public opinion, honest governance, or even empirical reality?

Beginning next year, Republicans will control not only the House and Senate but also 60 percent of state governorships and nearly 70 percent of partisan state legislatures, their strongest position ever. At the same time, the party is being led by a group of people with politics so extreme and explanations so silly—and often transparently dishonest—that one cannot help but question their sanity. Can Donald Trump really believe that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and that virtually all undocumented immigrants are potential rapists and murderers? Can Ben Carson truly consider Obamacare on a par with slavery? And which answer would be more comforting: shameless liar or lunatic fantasist?

And yet *The Washington Post* recently reported on a “growing anxiety bordering on panic among Republican elites about the dominance and durability” of Trump and Carson and “widespread bewilderment over how to defeat them.” The story quoted an unnamed strategist who worried, “We’re potentially careening down this road of nominating somebody who frankly isn’t fit to be president in terms of the basic ability and temperament to do the job.... It’s not just that it could be somebody Hillary could destroy electorally, but what if Hillary hits a banana peel and this person becomes president?” What the story did not explain—and what most members of the punditocracy appear intent on denying—is that this same disease has infected the entire Republican field. In the hopes of appealing to angry, ill-informed, and xenophobic primary voters, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, and Carly Fiorina are all adopting positions that are not only beyond the boundaries of the beliefs of the vast majority of Americans, but also contrary to the laws of physics, economics, and, of course, common sense.

The causes are multifaceted and mutually reinforcing. Most obvious is the power of money in

a post-*Citizens United* world. Billionaires like the Koch brothers, Sheldon Adelson, Rupert Murdoch, and Paul Singer defend their fortunes and positions by investing in a massive infrastructure designed to purvey misinformation and mask the extremism of Republican candidates who spout it. A combination of housing patterns (often enforced by officially sanctioned segregation) and aggressive gerrymandering by Republican state legislatures stacks the deck against Democratic voters, who are profoundly underrepresented at the state and federal levels.

The Democrats are also at fault. By failing to present a class-based appeal to Americans besieged by a pitiless global capitalism, they’ve allowed themselves to be defined as elitist snobs who view the everyday struggles of working-class Americans—especially white males—with contempt. At the same time, they have failed to protect vulnerable minorities from the consequences of the rage and fear felt by this class—manifested most obviously in oppressive patterns of policing that victimize people of color, impoverishing their families, weakening their communities, and ensuring their lifelong alienation from mainstream society.

Liberals like yours truly spend a lot of time obsessing over Fox News and talk-radio. But no less a significant factor in the success of the irredentists has been the willingness of so many members of the mainstream media to run interference for—and therefore legitimize—the same dangerous nonsense in the guise of allegedly objective reporting. The mainstream media’s coverage of every Republican debate so far has had the effect of subordinating reality to fantasy. Jonathan Martin’s front-page *New York Times* report on the most recent debate deemed that fib-fest to be a “robust seminar on the issues.” In an article devoted to the lies dominating the election cycle, the *Times*’s Michael Barbaro could not bring himself to go further than to say that Carson “harshly turned the



The mainstream media’s coverage of every Republican debate so far has had the effect of subordinating reality to fantasy.

questions" about inconsistencies in his life story "back on the reporters who asked them," and that Fiorina "refused" to back down from a story about Planned Parenthood that was "roundly disputed." And in what read like a parody of the idiotic "both sides do it" meme, Barbaro equated all this with the fact that Hillary Clinton once described herself as being the granddaughter of four immigrants when, in fact, one was born shortly after her family arrived in the United States—something she quickly corrected. Beyond that, he found a few (largely personal) fibs from Democrats who ran for president in the late 1980s and '90s, as if these were somehow equivalent to the lies that Republican candidates are telling today. (Barbaro also appeared unimpressed with Clinton's explanations about her e-mail accounts, as though these might qualify as lies.)

Damon Linker, the former editor of the theocon magazine *First Things*, recently issued this challenge to

his "conservative intellectual" friends: How could any "well-read man or woman, regardless of ideological commitments," observe the "unprovoked and petty anti-intellectualism...nonsensical, conspiratorial musings... xenophobic promises," and "dumpsters full of dubious assertions" that characterized the Republicans' recent debate "and not come away disgusted"? No doubt many Republicans are privately wondering the same thing. And yet it works: The crazier these guys sound, the more popular they become.

Friday evening, just as news of the Paris attacks was coming through, I saw an Off Broadway revival of Arthur Miller's *Incident at Vichy*. One character mused, "You get tired of believing the truth. You get tired of seeing things clearly." He was talking about a far more disturbing historical moment (and an entirely different political context), but even so, I understood what he meant. ■

No doubt many Republicans are disgusted by the "unprovoked and petty anti-intellectualism" of the recent debates. And yet it works.



FIVE BOOKS/CHENXIN JIANG

China's Cultural Revolution

This Fall Books issue includes Jiang's translation of Liao Yiwu's essay "Bullets and Opium," about the Chinese democracy movement's brutal suppression in 1989. She has also translated Ji Xianlin's *The Cowshed*, a defining memoir of the Cultural Revolution. "The most intriguing books on the subject draw out the continuities between contemporary China and its Maoist past," Jiang says. Here, she recommends five.

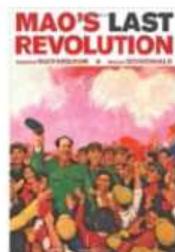


China in Ten Words

by Yu Hua
Translated by Allan H. Barr

Vintage, 2012

Yu Hua's searching essays distill modern China into riffs on just 10 words. Essays centered on terms such as "people," "leader," "reading," and "revolution" reach back to Yu's childhood during the Cultural Revolution, when he witnessed extrajudicial executions. Later, he turns to the present day: Violence on the scale of the Cultural Revolution, Yu argues, is still officially sanctioned, now in the form of forcible demolitions that evict homeowners in favor of rapid property development.

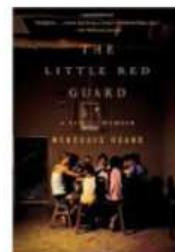


Mao's Last Revolution

by Roderick MacFarquhar & Michael Schoenhals

Harvard University Press, 2006

The most nuanced, in-depth history accessible to the general reader, MacFarquhar and Schoenhal's authoritative account tracks the interactions between Communist Party elites at every stage of the Cultural Revolution. The authors reconstruct Mao's motives for instigating the violence, arguing that he was concerned that China would be derailed by Khrushchev-style revisionism. They also dissect murky episodes such as the mysterious death of military leader Lin Biao.



The Little Red Guard: A Family Memoir

by Wenguang Huang

Riverhead Books, 2012

When Wenguang Huang's grandmother announces that she wants a traditional burial instead of the more space-efficient cremation favored by the Communist Party, his family has to surreptitiously skirt the Party's ban as they scramble to procure a wooden coffin. Huang's memoir, unlike most others set during the Cultural Revolution, shows how the iconoclastic radicalism of the era impacted one family's attempt to practice their traditional beliefs.



Confessions: An Innocent Life in Communist China

by Kang Zhengguo
Translated by Susan Williford

W.W. Norton & Company, 2007

Kang Zhengguo's somewhat reckless attempt to obtain a copy of *Doctor Zhivago* during the Cultural Revolution lands him in a rural labor reeducation camp. A misfit and incorrigible freethinker, Kang has an instinct for getting himself deeper in trouble every step of the way. The fate of his fellow prisoners (including one who served six years for accidentally shattering a plaster figurine of Mao) exemplify the worst excesses of the Maoist cult at its peak.



Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class

by Joel Andreas

Stanford University Press, 2009

In this award-winning study, sociologist Joel Andreas argues that the Cultural Revolution initially pitted China's older educated elite against a younger peasant revolutionary vanguard, before eventually driving them together to create today's ruling class: the technocratic officials who count current and former leaders like Xi Jinping and Hu Jintao among their ranks. Andreas's engaging account of radical politics at Tsinghua University demonstrates the relevance of 1960s history in understanding China today.

NO REST FOR THE WEARY

Travel Costs

As Patricia J. Williams discusses in her column, luxurious tours sponsored by the Four Seasons allow wealthy travelers to traverse the globe without encountering troublesome border controls, the hardship of toting luggage, or even the bottom of one's champagne flute. The cost? Only \$120,000.

Glancing down from their all-first-class Boeing 757, these luxury tourists might see the warped reflection of their happy peregrinations. Millions of migrants fleeing violence and starvation are posing their own challenge to national borders. Take, for example, the tens of thousands of Afghans estimated to have left their country just this year. In one of the most inexpensive and common routes, these Afghan migrants flee on foot to Iran, where they have to pay a smuggler just to shepherd them across that country, before facing further hazardous trails through Turkey and Greece. The cost of being smuggled through Iran alone? As much as \$12,000, according to a recent report by *Stars and Stripes*.

Most of these migrants hope to reach Germany, Sweden, or another well-off country in order to find a job—but right-wing politicians have now seized on the fear created by the Paris attacks to begin shutting the borders down. This is unlikely to inconvenience those lucky travelers enjoying a Four Seasons tour. Having enough wealth to be welcome anywhere? Priceless.



The Carceral Rich

Elites fly over tragedy at a comfortable distance.

Tried but failed to ward off the second bottle of champagne," begins David Brooks's much-derided essay in the November 15 issue of the *New York Times* style magazine, *T*. Entitled "My \$120,000 Vacation," the piece recounts his genteel discomfort with the Four Seasons' opulent "new 24-day, round-the-world fantasy trip."

His heart is really in the right place, sort of: "I tried to protest," Brooks says of that champagne. "Sometimes it is the structure of things that you shall be pampered and you have no choice but to sit back and accept that fact." Indeed, the velvet ropes and fur-lined handcuffs of "Turkish delight," Russian caviar, and "tray of figs" render him helpless: "Other sweet moments came when I just said what the heck and enjoyed the self-indulgence." After all, "we all have a responsibility to reduce inequality in our society. But maybe not every day." In any event, Brooks notes, "it's one thing to say you should have an authentic travel experience with the people, but sometimes sitting for four hours on the floor of the Casablanca airport is just a useless pain." And so the Four Seasons trip offers "staff at every stop," who occupy themselves with filling out customs forms, carrying luggage, and delivering envelopes conveniently filled with the local currency.

It was rather unfortunate that Brooks's piece was published while the world was still numb with shock after the devastating attacks and loss of life in Paris. It was perhaps doubly unfortunate that the article has received much more attention than the horrific pair of bombings in Beirut, Lebanon, that took more than 40 lives just one day before the Paris attacks. Of course, it would have been just as unfortunate had it been published a few weeks earlier, when a US gunship attacked an Afghan hospital, resulting in the deaths of at least 30 doctors, nurses, and patients. It was also unfortunate when Brooks observed that his voyage of 24 days might, in the "commercial" world, have taken 90—for it was left glaringly unspoken that in the less-than-commercial world of desperate diaspora, such a trip would probably take many lifetimes as well as lives. And it was altogether unfortunate that the Four Seasons' sleek, "fast-moving bubble" of luxury presented such a stark

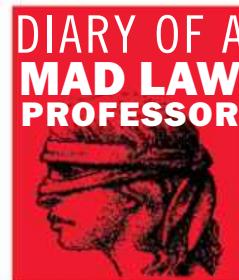
contrast with the rhetoric of walls, fences, drownings, rapists, parasites, animals, human garbage, and expulsion dominating the political debates over migration in the rest of the week's news.

Brooks's smooth glide upon a "vapor trail of...hospitality" was not just a "fantasy trip," but premised upon fantastical presumptions about the real world. When he observed that his fellow travelers were hard-working ordinary folk—"the lower end of the upper class," who "treated the crew as friends and equals and not as staff"—I wanted to start humming the theme from *Driving Miss Daisy*. This is a narrative arc whose symbolic disconnects ought to have been extinguished forever when George W. Bush flew over the devastation left by Katrina and claimed that he felt New Orleans's pain. It is a narrative whose darker, sharper edge was on display when the *Times*'s own former reporter, Judith Miller, responded to the Parisian catastrophe by tweeting: "Now maybe the whining adolescents at our universities can concentrate on something other than their need for 'safe' spaces."

All this, in a world of such horrific violence that all any of us desires is the geography of safe space. As Vijay Prashad wrote of François Hollande's commitment to wage war on the ideological evanescence of ISIS: "Macho language about 'pitiless war' defines the contours of leadership these days. Little else is on offer. It is red meat to our emotions."

But high end or low, life on this exhausted planet with its wandering, traumatized populations is rapidly imposing equality on us all. One must wonder what happens if the global gaze of state surveillance is further deployed to "restrict liberties in order to defend liberty," as Judith Butler wrote in a letter from Paris titled "Mourning Becomes the Law." The years since 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq have seen an exponential growth in the industries of surveillance and in the confinement of our own

Patricia J. Williams



In aerial photos, the panopticonic layout of America's prisons resembles nothing so much as Versailles.

gaze. Take "black sites," for instance: Not only acts of terrorism, but much-too-easy acts of official suppression, can flip a switch and turn the City of Light into a site of darkness.

Data artist Josh Begley is perhaps best known for his conceptual work Dronestream, now renamed Metadata+, an app that sends a push notification for every reported drone strike made by the United States in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and other war zones hidden from American eyes. His succinct summaries of the strikes are jarring: "Fifteen people were on their way to a wedding when a US drone 'missed its target' killing 15."

That small act of looking has made the app the object of repeated attempts to shut it down, not only by the US government, but by Apple and its subsidiary iTunes—most recently in September. And across the globe, nations are enacting measures like Spain's new "gag law,"

which prohibits demonstrations near government buildings, or photographing arrests, or using Twitter, Facebook, and other social media to call on people to protest.

Begley's app, conversely, insists on the magnitude of human loss: What if no one cared, or even saw the places where you had lived or to which you had fled? What if no one saw those places where there is no one left to mourn? Begley is also the creator of Prison Map, a collection of aerial photos of federal prisons across the United States. The style of this work echoes similar photos of formal gardens and great cathedrals; the panopticonic layout of America's prisons resembles nothing so much as Versailles. From space, even the moated communities of the ultra-rich seem identical to those of the incarcerated poor. Expats, tourists, migrants, the imprisoned, and the self-contained: There is a doomed sense of equality between the view from above and the despair below. ■



If only we had a seasonally appropriate story about Middle Eastern people seeking refuge being turned away by the heartless.

@owillis,
Media Matters
research fellow
Oliver Willis

SNAPSHOT/EDGARD GARRIDO

It's the Real Thing

A man walks by oversized replicas of Coca-Cola bottles on a beach resort in Cancun, Mexico. Large-scale hotel and resort developments built in the 1970s have transformed the small fishing village on the Caribbean Sea, leading to reduced biodiversity and polluted water resources in recent years.



REUTERS

BACK ISSUES/2008

Ballyhoo and Bluster



In the spring of 2008, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote an essay in these pages about presidential candidate Barack Obama. Reviewing a book by the retrograde culture warrior Shelby Steele—subtitle: *Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win*—Coates explored what was new about Obama's blackness. Reading the piece now brings into sharp relief how much has changed in the past seven years, for Coates and for the country.

"The essential power of Barack Obama," Coates wrote, was "that he is revealing for white America the quiet mass of black people who do not spend their days calculating the wages of slavery." His blackness "has no need of marches and placards. It rejects an opportunistic ignorance of racism but understands that esoteric ramblings about white-skin privilege

do not move the discussion further. It does not need to bluster, to scream, to hyperbolize. Obama's blackness is like any other secure marker of identity, subtle and irreducible to a list of demands.... This is why all the fuss over how much or how little Obama addresses racism misses the point. Obama mentions white racism about as often as black people actually think about white racism—which is to say rarely."

Elsewhere in the piece, Coates writes of his having gradually "learned... that the much-ballyhooed powers of white people were neither good nor wicked, just overrated."

—Richard Kreitner

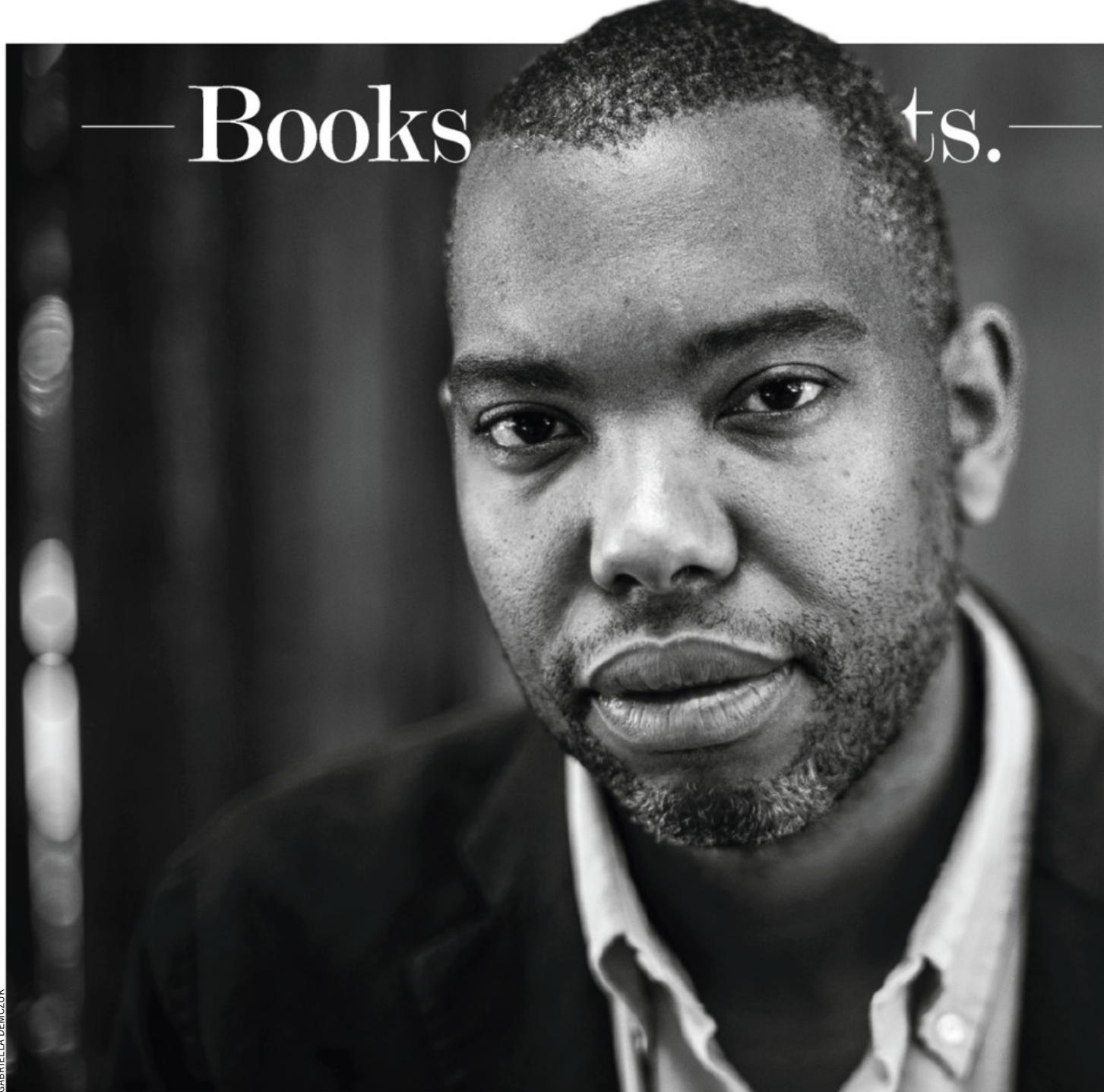
BEN CARSON'S PAST AND PRESENT

Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet

When Carson claims he was a bad-ass youth,
His tales and actual facts may vary.
But even if he didn't wield a shiv,
The man's ideas alone are scary.

—Books

ts.



GABRIELLA DEMCZUK

Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Love's Austere and Lonely Offices

by JESSE McCARTHY

When people sometimes ask me whether I consider myself black, I have to tell them that I am, and I remind them that the possibility of the question is itself the answer. To be black in the United States can involve existing in a kind of special interrogative mode, which is like standing in the long shadow of a question mark. This point is not merely an abstract analogy. The “blackness” of skin means what it does in the United States not because of melanin, but rather because of the long shadow of the



slave ship and Jim Crow. It is, to borrow James Baldwin's words, "not a human or a personal reality" but "a political reality," defined by the decisions and actions that have formed the history of the country we live in. Conversely, when white folks stammer that "white privilege" cannot possibly apply to them, I suggest that their very insistence is one small manifestation of that privilege,

namely of not having to question or be questioned, of being able to choose to lead an unexamined life in this country.

There is a deep strain of thought running through the black intellectual tradition in the United States that treats the long shadow of the question mark as foundational to self-understanding and to the struggle to claim one's rightful place in a society long wedded to its denial. "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question" is how W.E.B. Du Bois

begins *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), then famously adding that this question really boils down to another: "How does it feel to be a problem?" The title of *Between the World and Me* (Random House; \$24), the runaway bestselling memoir by Ta-Nehisi Coates, invokes Du Bois's question by way of a poem by Richard Wright, published in *Partisan Review* in 1935. In the poem, Wright describes discovering the evidence of a lynching: "And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly upon the thing, / Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by the scaly oaks and elms / And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me." Then, in graphic detail, he imagines his own death at the hands of a white mob: "They had me, stripped me, battering my teeth into my throat till I swallowed my own blood." Dating to a time when Wright was a Popular Front militant, the poem is at once a work of political protest, a cry of indignation, and a contribution to the long-running anti-lynching campaigns first organized and led by the suffragist and journalist Ida B. Wells in the early 1890s. But Wright's allusion to Du Bois is hardly incidental; it expresses another important dimension of the poem, which is Wright's growing sense of intellectual independence, and also of belonging to a tradition of black radical criticism that has never ceased to challenge and denounce the hypocrisies of the American Republic.

Ta-Nehisi Coates aims to carry on that tradition in our own time. By writing under the double sign of Du Bois and Wright, he places his book in the company of the moral and philosophical inquiries of *The Souls of Black Folk* and the lyrical autobiography of Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). Composed as an open letter to his teenage son, *Between the World and Me* also invokes the beautiful prefatory letter from James Baldwin to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin's searing book about race and religion in the United States. Coates acknowledges not only the ongoing vitality and urgency of a tradition, but also that the enduring paradoxes and pitfalls these writers confronted are his as well: How do you become a black writer in a country structured by the legacy of white supremacy? How do you communicate across audiences, especially when so many of the largest one in your country have a vested interest in failing to recognize your humanity? How do you navigate the points of reference of a black audience and a largely white liberal one, with some of the latter inevitably looking to you to embody the dreadful role of "spokesperson" for black America?

The relationship between black intellec-

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tuals and the liberal establishment has always been fraught. Liberals tend to endorse claims of injustice only if those making them acknowledge that progress has been achieved, and that, explicitly or implicitly, liberals should be thanked for having facilitated it. Coates rightly refuses to flatter or encourage this liberal good feeling. He has often said in interviews that he simply doesn't accept the view—one favored by President Obama—summed up in the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous words, adapted from those of the abolitionist Theodore Parker, that "the arc of the moral universe...bends toward justice." Look at history, Coates urges, and you'll see that it can just as easily bend the other way; the direction depends on circumstance, not Providence. This cutting rebuke to liberal good feeling and Obama's optimism is one reason why Coates's new book has attracted attention nationwide.

There's another traditional buttress of the black intellectual that Coates knocks aside. Like Wright, he has an equivocal and sometimes hostile attitude toward black religious traditions, a legacy from which he takes absolutely no solace, even though he knows it has shaped his writing. Coates's iconoclasm puts him in a vulnerable but intellectually exciting place, leaving the reader wondering how extensive and relentless his self-examination will be. It's not surprising, then, that early criticism of his book has singled out passages in which Coates's self-examination seems to fall short. Some reviewers have taken umbrage at his sentimental treatment of women and pressed him to pay more attention to the stories of women who have criticized the racial injustice of American society. This criticism itself is a positive reflection of the ways in which the influence of women in public discussions of race can no longer be treated as secondary or marginal. But it is also a reminder that too many marginalized women continue to be "structurally denied the ability to tell our stories," as the writer Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah recently remarked.

Coates's reply thus far has been that he can't be expected to write from a perspective other than his own. That's true: Readers shouldn't presume that a writer must write the book we would wish them to write. On the other hand, it's appropriate to hold a writer to account for bringing important questions to light but failing to bring his own work into focus. The stories Coates knits together in *Between the World and Me* urgently invite a closer examination of class relations, the use of race as a tool of reaction in electoral politics, and changes in the structure of the economy and their impact on the propagation of stereotypes and just-so

stories about race. In short, they invite a critical engagement from a black perspective that the nation desperately needs, but that Coates, in a surprising departure from his journalism, largely eschews in his book.

This is not done out of carelessness or neglect. Coates has given us a testimony, a letter to his son that combines the private force of witness and survival with an austere philippic against the American state, the likes of which we have not seen in a generation. It's a work of vital importance, a writer's intervention in a particularly turbulent time. It is also highly personal, a painful journey of coming into consciousness that relates the gradations and markers of a shift in a man's sense of himself and the world. This interweaving of the private and the public makes assessing his book challenging. There is no sense in disputing the truth of someone's experience. But Coates is not only a witness with a story; he is a celebrated essayist, polemicist, and commentator on public affairs. His words are read as part of a greater debate about the state of black politics and social life. It is therefore appropriate, I think, to engage his writing in those broader terms. I certainly believe his work deserves it.

Coates is a journalist by trade and cut his teeth at the *Washington City Paper* under the editorship of David Carr, who later became the media critic at *The New York Times*, and whose mentorship Coates movingly acknowledged when Carr died earlier this year. Coates has been writing for *The Atlantic* since 2008, and last year he became a household name when that magazine published his cover story, "The Case for Reparations." In an essay blending history and reportage, Coates argued that the systemic depredations visited upon black citizens by the state were reason enough to reexamine the case for a congressional bill proposing to study slavery, its lingering effects, and remedies for them like material reparations. The controversy over such a bill, he argued, would force a reckoning with seldom-acknowledged aspects of racial dispossession, like redlining in housing policy. Coates is also a formidable duelist, always razor-sharp in argument. Last year, in a running exchange in the pages of *The Atlantic* and *New York* magazine, those talents were on display as he attacked Jonathan Chait for confusing the "culture of poverty" with "black culture." But in his autobiographical writings, Coates has deliberately veered away from his public voice; there is a strong sense of a shift, not just in voice but in audience. If his journalistic writing is professional, battle-hardened, and generally directed at what

he may rightly assume to be largely a white audience, his autobiographical work goes in the opposite direction: It feels loose, intimate, and addressed primarily to a black readership.

Born in 1975, Coates grew up at the height of the crack epidemic on Baltimore's Westside. He wrote memorably about the neighborhood's turbulence in his previous memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), which delves more deeply than his new book into his childhood—particularly his relationship with his brother, but also with friends and extended family, a large cast only glimpsed in *Between the World and Me*. Composed in an ironic, jaunty, and playful vernacular style, *The Beautiful Struggle* juxtaposes the familiar pains of coming of age with the tribulations of having to do so in a violent and impoverished neighborhood. By contrast, the tone of *Between the World and Me* is dead sober, earnest, and unmistakably elegiac. Coates's is the voice of a father who has accepted the terrible truth that he will not be able to protect his own child from the world. His description of the ethics of living in the ghetto is one of unsparing, forceful clarity, and he writes about the immediacy of lived experience with a hard-won, stoic composure. "When I was your age," he tells his son, "the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid." After someone pulls a gun on him in the sixth grade, he rides the subway home alone, "amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon." He sees the terrible command of fear over everyday life, how it can explode into violence and distort and devastate entire neighborhoods like a plague. "The violence," he writes, "rose from the fear like smoke from a fire."

The smoke clouded the home of his childhood. Coates is unflinching but also nonjudgmental when explaining the beatings he routinely endured at the hands of his father, Paul Coates. His recollection of his father's justification for the beatings ("I would hear it in Dad's voice—'Either I can beat him, or the police'") itself recalls Ralph Ellison's comment on the parental beatings in Jim Crow Mississippi described by Wright in *Black Boy*: "One of the Southern Negro family's methods of protecting the child is the severe beating—a homeopathic dose of the violence generated by black-white relationships." These are tangent and even congruent expressions of the internalized effects of white supremacy, and that they represent experiences 70 years apart should give us pause. How might one protect one's body, Coates asks, when that body is marked as susceptible to potentially lethal violence

at any time? "The culture of the streets [is] a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body... When I was about your age," he tells his son, "each day fully one-third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled...." The pressure and pain of these conditions led Coates to question their origins.

As so often in the black autobiographical tradition, the search for knowledge and the steady rise to self-consciousness is the book's emotional and narrative core. Coates was fortunate in having a family that rejected all dogmas and encouraged its members to seek out books for themselves, to ask questions and find their own answers. It was his grandmother who motivated him to write, Coates says, by asking him to explain himself whenever he got into trouble at school. This ritual of "constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the search for certainty," is the credo of Coates's work, and the legacy of earlier generations. As Coates recounts, the seeds planted in the 1960s made it possible for him to buy Malcolm X tapes at a neighborhood bookstore and listen to them on his Walkman in the early 1990s. There was also his father's personal library of eclectic and Afrocentric literature to peruse.

Paul Coates had been a member of the local chapter of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s; having survived the party's disintegration, he became a librarian at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. Ta-Nehisi Coates's account of his own time at Howard is one of the most affecting and powerful sections of *Between the World and Me*. "My only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University," he writes. Part of the promise was "the Yard," the "communal green space in the center of campus," where Coates discovered a panorama of worldly blackness and an intellectual milieu richer and more complex than he had expected. "I did not find a coherent tradition," he writes of his first heady forays into Moorland's treasure trove of materials. Where he had hoped to find authorities who would endorse a black ideology to counter white supremacy, he had instead discovered rich streams of dissent erupting from debates within the intellectual tradition: "Hurston battled Hughes, Du Bois warred with Garvey, Harold Cruse fought everyone." Similarly, among the students gathered in the Yard, Coates sensed the intimacy of an unexpected diversity of black experience. The example of James Baldwin feels particularly close in the alloy of moral epigram and personal epiphany that bonds

certain passages: "Hate gives identity. The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, or being a Man. We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in the tribe. But my tribe was shattering and reforming around me."

The joy and emancipation promised by the Yard are scarred by the murder of Prince Jones, a fellow student whose death at the hands of a Prince George's County police officer haunts these pages. For Coates, the tragedy of Jones's slaying is much more than an indictment of a notoriously racist and corrupt police force. It also stands as a firm rebuke to the blacks (and whites) who advocate a "politics of respectability," clinging to the notion that what deters black achievement is a failure to follow the standards and codes to which "successful" middle-class people adhere. Unlike Coates, Jones was raised by affluent parents in the suburbs and given every opportunity and amenity of bourgeois life. He was, by all accounts, an excellent and upstanding student who could have applied to Ivy League schools but chose to attend Howard instead, a person respected and respectable. But on the night of his murder—by a black plainclothes officer—Jones was targeted despite the fact that his height, build, and hair didn't match the description of the suspect being sought by police. All that mattered in that crucial moment was the color of his skin.

Coates's anger over the murder of Jones clouds much of the book's second half, which strains at times from the compression of a great amount of material into relatively few pages. We follow Coates to New York City, where he makes his way as a freelance writer and black husband and father in a city of vertiginous white privilege and wealth, and later to France and his discovery of the play of cultural difference there; we follow him to Gettysburg, where he teaches his son about the importance of the Civil War, and finally back to Howard for an ecstatic experience of homecoming but also a last interview with Mable Jones, mother of the murdered Prince. After their conversation, the book concludes with Coates driving out past "beauty shops, churches, liquor stores, and crumbling housing" into "a rain coming down in sheets," an image that cannot escape the weight of biblical portent.

In these later sections, Jones's murder acts like the imagined lynching in Wright's poem. "Prince Jones was the superlative of all my fears," Coates writes. He becomes a figure for a whole history of violence against black bodies, past and present, kin and stranger,

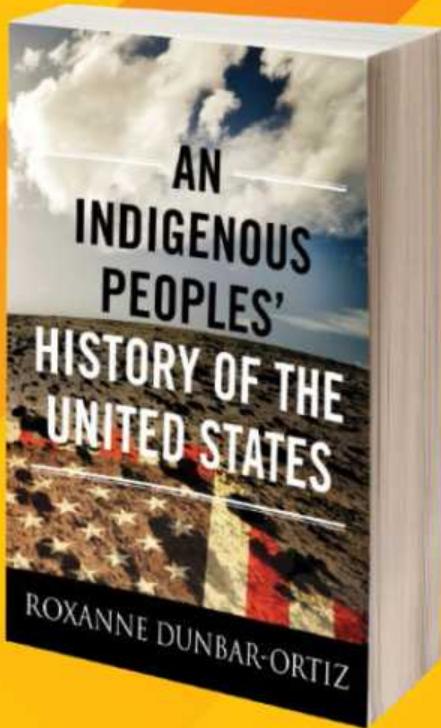
distilled into a single frame. This fusion is at once symbolic and emotional. Prince Jones's death affects Coates first and foremost as a father who is thinking about what he has to offer his own son. No matter how much personal advantage Coates accumulates, no matter how well he raises his son, the boy will be vulnerable to a lethal force beyond reason and beyond control.

Behind Coates's struggle to live freely in a black body lies another vexing question: What is heritage? What does it mean to pass on belonging to or being excluded from something as vast as a culture, or a race? To pass on a body of knowledge about bodies inscribed in the flesh? At the most intimate level, the quotidian one where we are most vulnerable, nothing is more true, more immediately relevant, than how others see our bodies. Nothing appears more powerful than the signs all around us that inform us of our bodies' worth, or lack thereof; that determine whether that body exists within a circle of acceptance or is seen as belonging to a world beyond the reach of care, empathy, or even the law. In this light, the history of American violence directed at the black body assumes the shape and aura of a law. One of Coates's most memorable lines is his declaration that "in America it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage." This is an important statement, a bone that ought to stick in the throats of those Americans, conservatives and liberals alike, who try to airbrush history to suit a more uplifting vision.

The worst aspects of racism are visited in violence upon the body and depend on color and little else. Try to imagine a white police officer, sworn to protect the public, dragging a 14-year-old white girl to the ground by her hair and kneeling on her back for disturbing a pool party. It's an unthinkable scenario. But it happened this past summer to a 14-year-old black girl in McKinney, Texas, at the hands of an officer who then drew his gun on her friends as they protested her treatment. This kind of random racist behavior occurs all the time, capable of escalating to mortal danger seemingly out of nowhere, and only occasionally captured by witnesses. How could one not conclude that we are indeed hostages, "captured" and "surrounded," as Coates puts it, "here, in our only home"?

And yet the version of his life story that Coates passes along to his son promotes the power of the mind and self-examination, and stresses the role that one's sense of self and of the world plays in determining one's fate. After all, despite the forces arrayed against his body, Coates has been able to achieve an important intellectual and per-

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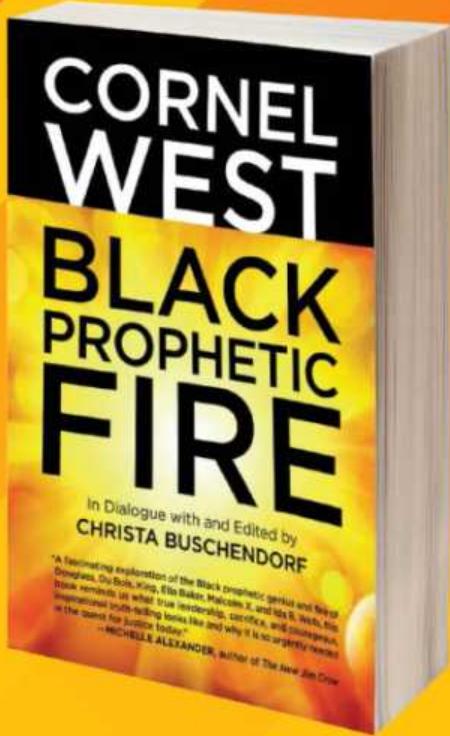
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sonal emancipation. The strongest parts of his book are suffused with the palpable force of intellectual discovery, the new vistas that come with seeing the world in historical procession, with an awareness of the role of social force, the richness and complexity of cultural creation. For Coates, this freedom remains tragic. The mind, however cunning, is bound to the body and can still be crushed by one racist act. Perhaps one discomfiting lesson of Coates's book is that the work of living with a free mind has to be undertaken whether or not one can ever truly live in a free body. The possibilities for a black child in this world are constrained by the ability to forge a sense of dignity in it. Whatever the price, that struggle is worth it. That struggle is also our inheritance, passed down through generations held in bondage.

These passages, in which Coates addresses his son clearly and directly, are for me the book's most haunting moments. They remind me of the poet Robert Hayden's beautiful homage to his father, "Those Winter Sundays," with its memorable closing line about "love's austere and lonely offices." Coates tells his son: "What I wanted for you was to grow into consciousness. I resolved to hide nothing from you." The task he sets before him is both ambiguous and monumental. "You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels," he declaims, while also warning him to "remember that this consciousness can never ultimately be racial; it must be cosmic." This is admirable, though asking a 15-year-old to walk like Malcolm after Mecca does seem a bit severe. Still, I think it's bold and beautiful for Coates to try.

But throughout Coates's book, such austere and lonely intimacy is intermittent and unevenly expressed. More generally, his tone falters when discussing historical and social subjects that are less personal and require nuance. Much of this stems from the constraints imposed by the convention of writing a letter to one's son. This raises the question of why Coates chose to adopt this convention in the first place. Obviously, there's the inspirational example of Baldwin. There is also an attractive directness of address, an almost confessional weight that the form permits. But another important reason is that it creates a sentimental bridge between two divergent audiences that Coates is trying to address simultaneously. This is a daring gambit, though probably impossible to pull off. The result is that Coates sometimes resorts to rhetoric that feels stilted and hyperbolic.

Consider, for example, his use of "the Dream" or "Dreamers" as shorthand for the white suburban pastoral of "perfect houses with nice lawns." For Coates, "the Dream" is an ideal maintained at the expense of black lives, insofar as those who live in it refuse to acknowledge the institutional racism that has been instrumental in the creation of such ideals and the maintenance of their exclusivity. It's easy to understand what Coates means by "the Dream," especially since for a long time it has been transmitted, as he acknowledges, through daytime television. But why indulge this fiction in the first place? The neoliberal financialization of the economy that began with the Reagan Revolution, and that has devastated black neighborhoods and gutted the organized working class across the nation, certainly didn't spare people of other races and cultures. Why not admit that there are vast stretches of entrenched white poverty (representing nearly 40 percent of all welfare "handouts," incidentally)? Why not remind people that the dark side of "the Dream" is the ongoing heroin epidemic ravaging predominantly white middle-class families, or the spread of meth across rural lower-class white communities, where lives are being destroyed as well? Why not attack outright the myth of an ideal white community—which exists nowhere—instead of using it as a rhetorical crutch?

Another crutch is Coates's evocation of environmental disaster toward the end of the book: "It is the flight from us that sent them sprawling into the subdivided woods. And the methods of transport through these new subdivisions, across the sprawl, is the automobile, the noose around the neck of the earth, and ultimately, the Dreamers themselves." Using an image of lynching to describe something as abstract as climate change strikes me as contrived, if not inappropriate (and I share Coates's opinion about the environment and the car). It's hard to believe this language is addressed to his son; perhaps it's meant to appeal to readers familiar with Elizabeth Kolbert's writings on climate change and human extinction. At times, hyperbole leads Coates to throw down bolts that sting where they should, but elsewhere it results in an exhaustion of metaphor.

What gets obscured by Coates's metaphoric handles is class; yet there's no story about race in America that can afford to ignore the realities of class interest. Voting blacks, many of them staunchly middle class, supported Clinton's "tough on crime" measures in the 1990s. Maryland's Prince George's County—which, as Coates points out, has a reputation for police corruption

and brutality—is also one of the richest majority-black counties in the nation. That doesn't make racism a less important factor in the killing of Prince Jones. But is the larger pattern attributed to the PG County police force also in each case a matter of black-on-black racism—or is there a class bias at work as well, with the county's well-to-do inhabitants sending a message that certain blacks don't belong in the enclave they've carved out for themselves? Coates tells his son that some "theories" of law and order came up "even in the mouths of black people," but he drops the matter without further explanation. It's a false choice to pit color against class in determining racial inequality; both are essential to understanding social relations. But by skating over the realities of class politics instead of endeavoring to explain their complexity, one can end up undermining the case for structural racism instead of demonstrating it.

One of the frustrations of *Between the World and Me* is that Coates says less than he knows. In his reparations essay, incisive prose demolishes myths and displays the material and moral consequences of political crimes that are hiding in plain sight. I simply do not believe that his readers, black or white, require the cloudy metaphor of "the Dreamers" to grasp his argument, or can't confront head-on the realities of class antagonism or the pernicious violence of colorism and sexism. If people really are "dreaming," the way to wake them up can't be to feed them clichés and narratives in which they have no agency, in which history is largely a catastrophe that has already happened, and all they can do now is watch the ship go down.

I also take issue with Coates's repeated suggestion that black folks are at the mercy of forces they will never be able to shape. "The fact of history is that black people have not—probably no people have ever—liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts," he writes. There's no question that historical forces are compacted and impossible to disentangle, but this statement is surely uncharitable to Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution; to the Jamaican Maroons; to the Quilombos in Brazil; to the ANC in South Africa; to Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau; to Madison Washington's commandeering of the *Creole*; to Harriet Tubman, who freed herself and her family and went back for countless others; and to all the individuals and organizations, secular, religious, and militant, that banded together and broke Jim Crow in the American South. But despite this air of dismissal, Coates isn't a quietist; he's a pessimist. He believes in struggle while maintaining a paradoxical

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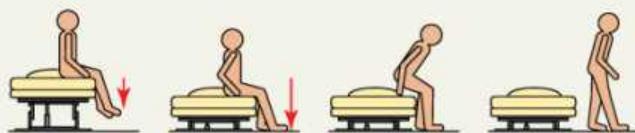


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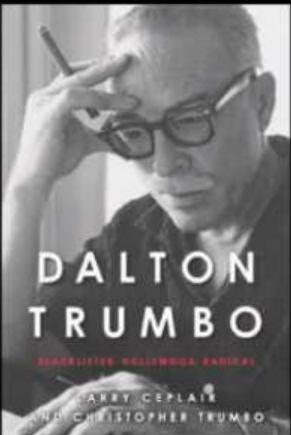
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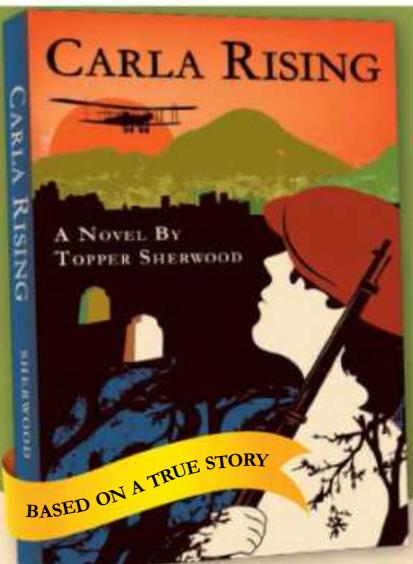


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skepticism about its effectiveness. He tells his son, Samori—named for a military hero who resisted French colonial expansion in West Africa—that he must struggle, “not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.” This is wonderfully put, but I would observe that most black people are already struggling. This summer, concerned parents undertook a hunger strike just to protect a local high school in Chicago. The question is how to empower that struggle, against whom to direct it, with what allies, by what means, and with what vision of society before us?

There is a real need today for writing that shatters people’s cynicism and perceived impotence, for the grain of truth that brings them back to politics, where so much ground has been ceded. The American prison archipelago is a nimble and ruthless adversary with enormous power. It is an instrument of profit, and the Corrections Corporation of America intends to keep it that way. Taser International, the company that promises to put body cameras on cops, also makes a handsome profit selling the devices to “light up” noncompliant traffic offenders. Coates says in this book that these forces “are the product of democratic will,” what he calls “majoritarian bandits.” This strikes me as implausible. They are the product of complacency and demagoguery and the hollowing out of democratic institutions and our political culture, not its malicious expression. The gutting of the Voting Rights Act was carried out through right-wing judicial activism, subverting the will of both the Senate and the House. The Ku Klux Klan, which originated in the post-Civil War struggle to overthrow the biracial governments of Reconstruction and restore white supremacy in the South, has never been an expression of democratic will, but rather a weapon for suppressing and intimidating democratic power at the ballot. The forces of white supremacy, in league with great wealth, have always feared true democracy, because they know they are outnumbered.

Coates writes at one point that “White America’ is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies.” But doesn’t this mistake the symptom for the cause? It would be more true to say that “White America” is a syndicate arrayed to protect powerful oligarchic profit, and that it has always been able and eager to do so by exploiting anti-black racism to harvest the enormous benefits of a labor force stripped of human rights and

dignity. If you believe that “White America” really is dedicated to white power for its own sake, that it seeks the domination of black bodies almost as a blood sport, then how can you even begin to dismantle such a massive structure of evil? If this vision is true, then Coates’s pessimism is indeed justified. But what if it is instead the case that white supremacy is merely a servant—as well as the original grease of laissez-faire capitalism, an arrangement of political economy in which everything is up for sale, including human beings, and which at the inception of the modern European world provided the mercantilists with the international market’s original “liquidity”? If you recognize this—that we are still bound to the illusion that it’s reasonable to live as if everything can be bought and sold, with the profits producing their own justification and all human and environmental costs relegated, at best, to an afterthought—then you can also identify an all-too-human structure of interest that can be actively fought and denounced for its abuses, greed, and fraudulent promises.

Two years after finishing “Between the World and Me,” Richard Wright wrote his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in which he famously declared that at “the moment when a people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.” Wright believed that black writers have a special obligation to help people discover this meaning. James Baldwin thought the same: In *The Fire Next Time*, he ends his letter to his nephew James by reminding him that he too has a rich inheritance to draw upon:

It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy peasant stock, men who picked cotton, dammed rivers, built railroads, and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unsassable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, “The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off.”

When Baldwin tells his nephew that the black folk whose survival and endurance have brought him forth are poets, he has in mind not the narrow sense of writers of verse, but the largest sense of the word in its Greek root *poiesis*: the will to make, to create, to transform. His invocation of the spiritual “My Dungeon Shook” is meant to serve as a reminder that the moment of fiercest despair can also be the catalyst for piercing clarity, for action and self-

liberation. One day, the American state will be forced to acknowledge that all black lives matter, and on that day they will. Coates is deeply skeptical of this ever happening, and

understandably so. But like all those who have taken up the pen to strike at America's racial injustice, he is also the inheritor of a proud tradition that has relentlessly and

defiantly believed that we have it in our means to break the spell of oppression, and that speaking truth to power is not an act of despair, but one of candescence. ■



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James Merrill (left) and David Jackson at the Ouija board in 1983.

Nothing Is Single

by ANGE MLINKO

Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore: "I lived for art, I lived for love." The line that launches Puccini's aria from *Tosca* might serve as an entrée to the life and art of James Merrill, whose 885-page *Collected Poems* and 640-page epic *The Changing Light at Sandover*, not to mention two separate volumes of collected prose, novels, and plays, are now joined by a landmark critical biography by Yale scholar Langdon Hammer. That this single line might hold in the balance one artist's lifework is a fitting prospect for a poet who was also an opera lover. (Merrill saw Maria Callas sing "Vissi d'arte" at the Metropolitan Opera in 1965, when he was 39, wildly infatuated with a younger lover, and writing his greatest love poems.) Merrill re-

vered the quip and the couplet, the aphorism and the quatrain, an ancient species of information technology. He gravitated early to the tightly constructed metaphysical poem, and kept returning to it even after he'd worked himself loose of his early, extreme aestheticism. He was a Modernist no less, animated too by gigantism and vision, like Ezra Pound and Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens.

Since his death in 1995, from a heart attack related to AIDS, Merrill's reputation has been hobbled by his respectability—the respectability of a poet who hailed from the Northeast, wrote impeccably, adhered to traditional forms, and was championed by Ivy League mandarins like Helen Vendler. At the same time, too many readers have

James Merrill

Life and Art.

By Langdon Hammer.

Alfred A. Knopf. 913 pages. \$40.

seen only the aestheticism in the work and not the vision, and have made specious connections between Merrill's adherence to meter and his social class. (He was the youngest child of Charles Merrill, co-founder of Merrill Lynch.) Though Merrill was admiring of poets like John Ashberry and Robert Duncan—experimentalists who nonetheless bent their individual talents toward tradition—his gracile talent has deflected attention from his own deep weirdness.

Hammer offers what we have badly needed: a posthumous reckoning of both Merrill's ordinariness and his strangeness. The biographer reconstructs the poet's art and his loves, writ great and small, from letters, diaries, poem drafts, Ouija-board transcripts, and interviews with those who shared his life (Merrill never lost track of a friend). One could surmise that the poet inspires friendship even after death: Hammer, who met him only once, as a college student, devoted 15 years to this book, and serves Merrill in every way that his subject might wish: as an artful storyteller, a writer of stylish paragraphs, a canny literary interpreter, and a sharer of values that spring from a deep education in centuries of literature. The biography offers scholarship but also sympathy, candor as well as delicacy. Hammer is an adept reader of human ambiguities who also refrains from pathologizing or excessively psychoanalyzing the lives of Merrill and his cohort, which were complicated by money and sexual subterfuge in pre-Stonewall America.

Hammer takes his cue from Merrill's own love of showmanship. He writes that the poet's "friends were arrayed around him like an opera cast: the principals, supporting singers, fabled stars with cameos, comic relief, an ingenue or two, and the full chorus behind." The only child of a glamorous, larger-than-life couple, how could Merrill have fancied himself otherwise? Charles Merrill and Hellen Ingram constituted a cosmos in miniature. Both grew up in modest circumstances in northeastern Florida. Charles described his upbringing as "poor," but the scrappy upstart (son of a country doctor) made it to boarding school, then Amherst College, then New York City. He created the Safeway grocery chain before inventing the first mass-market brokerage firm, in a kind of revenge against his genteel schoolmates. Ingram—or Hellen, as she is consistently called in the book (to remind us of Helen of Troy, Hellenism in general, and possibly "hellion" as well!)—was also self-made: She rose as a society reporter in Jacksonville and then Miami, where she published her own newsletter. Her work took her to New York, and her beauty brought her to Charles's notice.

They were married and then lived in the limelight for 13 years. Charles Merrill was perennially "warming up for a green bride," in his son's words: James was 11 when his parents split up, and the impact it had on him is summarized in his most anthologized poem, "The Broken Home." This elegy for his childhood is told in a series of sonnets, with imagery that molds Charles and Hellen into gods: first with Merrill lighting a

candle end ("what's left of my life") before an icon of the Holy Family ("I saw the parents and the child / At their window, gleaming like fruit / With evening's mild gold leaf"), then in his depiction of Charles in his previous incarnation as a fighter pilot:

My father, who had flown
in World War I,
Might have continued
to invest his life
In cloud banks well above
Wall Street and wife.
But the race was run below,
and the point was to win.

Keeping "several chilled wives / In sable orbit—rings, cars, permanent waves," the father is Zeus-like. Or more primordial yet: "Always that same old story— / Father Time and Mother Earth, / A marriage on the rocks"—pre-Olympian! Years later, when alluding in *The Changing Light at Sandover* to his father's Southampton estate, Merrill would pun on "ballroom" to invoke the castration of Uranus, which results in Aphrodite's birth from his sea-tossed genitals. Merrill's first novel, *The Seraglio*, caused consternation within the family: He had composed a roman à clef with Charles as the sultan.

Merrill's mythologization of his mother is even more pervasive and complex. In "The Broken Home," he remembers his child self stumbling upon Hellen asleep, alone in her bed: "her hair undone, outspread / And of a blackness found, if ever now, in old / Engravings where the acid bit." When the sleeping beauty awakens, the little prince takes fright and flees; it is unclear why, except that "she reached for me." The Oedipal mood is reprised in a later poem, "Up and Down." Mother and son are symbolically married (in a bank vault, by a safe-deposit box) when she bequeaths him an emerald ring "for your bride." He muses:

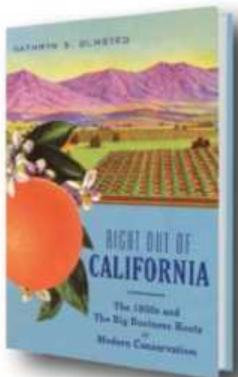
I do not tell her, it would
sound theatrical,
Indeed this green room's
mine, my very life.
We are each other's; there
will be no wife;
The little feet that patter
here are metrical.

Hellen knew perfectly well that there would be no bride, but mother and son spent half a century wrangling over his sexuality—he dissembling, she inveighing, he writing coded lines like "some blue morning also she may damn // Well find her windpipe slit with that same rainbow / Edge a mere weekend with you gives / To books, to living..." ("To

My Greek"). It was Hellen who discovered young Merrill's affair with Kimon Friar, his professor and mentor at Amherst, and convened a war council with Charles (hiring a hit man was discussed). It was Hellen who ruthlessly burned all his letters from this period of first love, in an effort to destroy evidence of his orientation. But it was also Hellen who introduced him to poetry: His first surviving poem, written at age 6, is an uncanny early version of the episode in "The Broken Home." (Hammer suggests that Hellen may have doctored his prosody.) She was a writer of occasional doggerel herself, and instructed her son on the joys of rhyme and meter, bidding him recite poems in company. Merrill would always be beholden to his earliest pleasure in form, and to the imperative to "impress and entertain" with it.

Merrill's privilege guaranteed him, first of all, the best education: a French-German governess; opera and symphony concerts at an early age; boarding school, where he struck up a literary friendship with Frederick Buechner, the future writer and theologian; attendance at Amherst; and, finally, the European Grand Tour. As a result, he had the good fortune to discover his affinities early on: His lifelong role models included Wilde, Proust, and the Marschallin from Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. He gravitated to women artists; in this formative period, he eschewed the Modernist giants for the verse of Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay. (He would come to prefer Elizabeth Bishop to all other living poets.) Besides endowing him with culture, wealth freed him from having to work for a living. But Merrill had a preternatural understanding of the pitfalls of his class. He threw himself into his chosen vocation with the same intensity of ambition, Hammer points out, that his father approached finance. His lover in his early 20s, Claude Fredericks, wrote in his diary: "He works, without stopping, for hours, writing hundreds of phrases in his notebook, reading the dictionary hour after hour, dragging each word out of his unconscious—finally, assembling the parts, he puts the poem together."

But there is no high road to the Muses, as Ezra Pound warned. The early verse could seem airless, excogitated, in its determined pursuit of timelessness. While Merrill was living with Fredericks in Rome, working on *The Seraglio* and writing the poems that later would appear in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, his *First Poems* (1951) was published, to mixed reviews. In this magazine, his technique was praised despite his "dearth of ardor"; Louise Bogan in *The New Yorker*



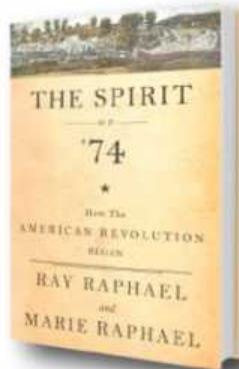
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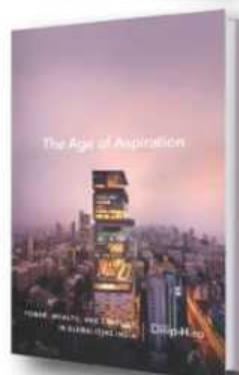
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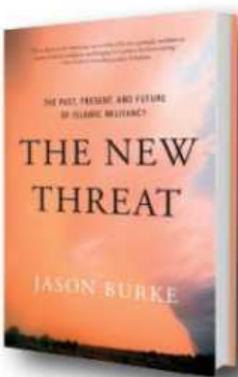
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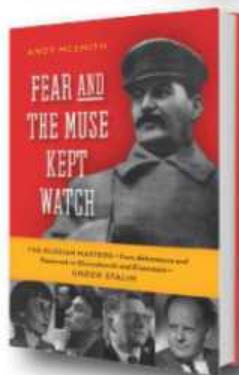
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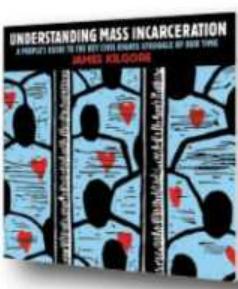


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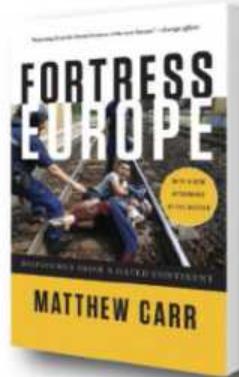
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WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

said the book “smells of the lamp.”

In his diaries, Merrill wrestled with the criticisms leveled against him, even when humiliating: “‘Only fairies sit down to write masterpieces.’ (Hemingway, quoted in *Time*.) a) Not true, alas. b) All too true.” The charge of coldness, however, was the one rebuke he took pains to address. There is an anecdote about his poem “Verse for Urania” that was recounted (lightly fictionalized) in Edmund White’s novel *The Farewell Symphony*. White was present as a mutual friend, the scholar David Kalstone, read a draft of the poem. “Isn’t it...a bit...cold?” Kalstone frets, in the guise of a character named Joshua. “Of course!” exclaims Merrill’s fictional counterpart. “I forgot to put the feeling in!”

He rushed upstairs to the cupola that served him as a study and fiddled with the verses for an hour before he descended with lines that made us weep, so tender were they, so melting and exalted. That night, when we were alone, Joshua whispered, “A rather chilling vision of the creative process, I’d say. We must never tell anyone about this, since how many people would understand and forgive the heartless, manipulative craftsmanship of great art?”

Merrill published two new volumes in quick succession, closing out his early period with *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* in 1959, and breaking out his new style with *Water Street* in 1962. The early style is lofty, impersonal, exquisite; Hammer argues that the book’s closing piece, “Mirror,” is Merrill’s first major poem and an *ars poetica*, “a sort of manifesto, a passionate reply to the poetry of ‘open form’ derived from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams that was fast gaining adherents in the later 1950s.” It’s a dramatic monologue in the voice of a mirror, which addresses itself to a window. The poem presents two openings into a room’s space—two different functions (one reflective, the other outward-looking), two radical philosophies of art. Merrill acknowledges being more mirror than window (he often noted the near-homonym with his name) and plays with the form to seem as though he is writing free verse, but “the last syllable in every second line rhymes with the penultimate syllable of the previous one,” Hammer points out.

Water Street, while still recognizably Merrillesque, responded to the criticism and to the changes afoot in the culture (augured by Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*): The poems are personal, conversational, frequently comic.

Water Street meditates on domesticity: Merrill had found his life partner, David Jackson, and the title refers to the home they shared in Stonington, Connecticut. In this book, too, he makes feints at free verse, only to return to the dominant key of iambic pentameter or tetrameter. Hammer notes that in breakthrough poems like “A Tenancy,” Merrill served up his most companionable tones in the tightest stanzas, upending the cliché that free verse is more generous, more direct. With this new combination of constraint and immediacy, Merrill developed a signature style that would carry him through the next three and a half decades.

Merrill’s *Collected Poems* hews closely to his life, and vice versa. One of the pleasures of Hammer’s biography is the opportunity it allows to read two giant tomes in parallel—and then three, once it comes to the *Sandover* chapters. Crosscutting between Hammer’s account of Merrill’s life in Stonington, Athens, and Key West, and the poems that emerged from his experiences there, readers will deepen their knowledge of real persons (the poems are wonderfully, generously peopled): the parents and lovers, first of all, but also great friends like the glamorous Maria Mitsotáki (“Words for Maria”). Few of these presences are literary. Merrill was collegial with contemporaries like Elizabeth Bishop, John Hollander, John Ashbery, and Richard Wilbur, and he mentored younger writers. But he didn’t insulate himself, either in academia or in Manhattan.

Vissi d’arte, we see—what about *vissi d’amore*? According to Hammer, “Merrill believed in nothing as he believed in love.” He fell head over heels with abandon in his youth, then three decisive times in his maturity: with Jackson in 1953; with Strato Mouflouzélis, a (much younger) Greek man, in 1964; and with Peter Hooten, a (much, much younger) actor, in his last decade. In between, there were a few one-sided romances and legions of sex partners, mostly in Athens.

Mouflouzélis inspired the most ardent love poems and came closest to providing the sort of seriocomic drama that Merrill cherished in his operettas. He met the 22-year-old serviceman at a dive bar in Omonia Square in 1964, when Merrill was 38. The relationship lasted on and off for years, surviving the distrustful intrusions of the young man’s working-class family, his acquisition of a wife and child, and finally his years-long dependence on Merrill’s money—with Mouflouzélis extracting gifts from the poet by stringing him along with

a promise to apply for a visa and come to Stonington, or by declaring medical emergencies. Merrill may have been loved more for his money than for his person, and not by Mouflouzélis only. Hammer refrains from judgment, but the reader can’t help speculating that the cash nexus deeply compromised Merrill’s affairs and turned him into a tragic lover—which, as a fan of Strauss’s *Marschallin*, he would have found honorable.

In “Days of 1964,” the rejuvenated poet exclaims, “If that was illusion, I wanted it to last long.” Some years later, in “Strato in Plaster,” he rues “those extra kilos, that moustache,” and “Days of 1971” regards the cooler temperatures the pair have fallen to:

Proust’s law (are you
listening?) is twofold:

- (a) What least thing our self-love longs for most
Others instinctively withhold;
- (b) Only when time has slain desire
Is his wish granted to a smiling ghost
Neither harmed nor warmed,
now, by the fire.

A decade later, Merrill notices a buzzing (“The House Fly”) and reminisces about one that settled on a sleeping Strato,

Who stirred in the lamp-glow but did not wake.
To say so brings it back
on every autumn
Feebler wings, and further
from that Sun,
That mist-white wafer she
and I partake of
Alone this afternoon, making a rite
Distinct from both the
blessing and the blight.

Merrill relished love, but also the relief that time provides from its ardor; it was one of his themes, and the ceremoniousness of his prosody is a ritual enactment of this calming.

If the charming Mouflouzélis was the muse of the erotic poetry, steadfast David Jackson was the midwife of Merrill’s epic trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover*—otherwise known as “the Ouija-board poems.” The Ouija sessions were a way to bind the couple together after both sex and art absented themselves from the relationship. (Jackson had had ambitions as both a novelist and a painter, which dribbled away into alcoholism.) With Jackson’s left hand on the teacup they used as a planchette, and Merrill’s left hand poised lightly on his, the pair queried “the spirits”; Merrill took



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"We have to have fun while trying to stave off the forces of darkness because we hardly ever win, so it's the only fun we get to have."

Molly Ivins

The Nation. November 17, 2003



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diction with his right. Yet he didn't use the transcripts as fodder for poetry until the 1970s. *The Book of Ephraim*, the first in the trilogy, reconstructs various séances over the decades in the form of an abecedarian. *Mirabell: Books of Number and Scripts for the Pageant* incorporate the spirits' dictation directly. All were written within a decade, with Merrill interpreting, and versifying, voluminous pages of transcripts that appear as long strings of letters, like ancient Greek writing—or like DNA, but with 26 chromosomes. The dialogue with the spirit named Ephraim was literary and philosophical; but as the trilogy progressed, it became more fantastical, crowded with the voices of the dearly departed (Jackson's parents, Maria Mitsotáki) in addition to an array of characters, from W.H. Auden to the Archangel Michael to a unicorn to a speaking peacock-bat, who discourse variously on "Biology and Chaos." The goal was alternately "a sacred poem that would serve God Biology, revealing the laws of his creation" and "a map of the imagination." Among its many influences was a coeval epic in progress on movie screens round the world: *Star Wars*.

What possessed Merrill (in every sense of that word)? For one thing, ambition:

A long poem was the test of any poet's powers.... Dante, Milton, Rilke, Pound. What would their shorter works amount to without the great achievements that crowned them? The notion struck me at twenty—at forty, too, for that matter—as a dangerous form of megalomania, and I wasn't buying any of it. But at fifty?

Those readers who profess to be baffled by Merrill's turn—the cosmopolitan gone cosmic—need only think of the Western poetic tradition. From the Anglo-Saxon, we have Caedmon—an illiterate cowherd who became the first recorded poet in Old English when an angel appeared to him and bid him sing "of the first Creation." From the Greeks, we have numerous legends of otherworldly inspiration: the nine Muses, Philomela's nightingale, Orpheus, Plato's *daimon*. And from the *Odyssey* we have the model of the *katabasis*, the descent into the underworld to garner knowledge of the future from the dead. These myths have inspired poets from Dante to Blake to Yeats to Pound—all of whom influenced *The Changing Light at Sandover*. And as with their visionary works, it pays to graze a little bit at first. Hammer helps us ease our way in, picking out glimmering passages that promise more. As Ephraim says, "I DECK MYSELF IN GLIMPSSES AS IN GEMS."

But *Sandover* wasn't just a test of Merrill's prowess: There was something fundamental in him that contained multitudes. We can only start to see it now—to think of him as a man overlaid with the trappings of mid-century American gentility (or neoformalism), but whose every impulse was toward multiplicity. Doubleness was, well, second nature: the "broken home," the closet, the window and the mirror, mother and father as opposing forces, even living in two countries. "A writer already has two lives, don't you think?" he once asked Kalstone. These were "the two sides of the creative temperament": active and passive, craftsman and receiver of inspiration.

In language, one could be more than double. An obsessive anagrammatist, Merrill approached the Ouija board as pure alphabet. He loved puns: "Indeed, the punster has touched...upon a secret, fecund place in language herself.... The pun (or the rhyme, for that matter) 'merely' betrays the hidden wish of words." When asked by the poet J.D. McClatchy what he found in Athens, Merrill revealed his orientation toward language as a reservoir of imagination rather than a tool of eloquence: Greek was "a language we didn't understand two words of at first. That was a holiday! You could imagine that others were saying extraordinarily fascinating things—the point was to invent, if not what they were saying, at least its implications, its overtones." One of his greatest poems is called "Lost in Translation," a multiple-mystery story about trying to find a Rilke translation of Valéry's "Palme" in Athens while simultaneously remembering a puzzle that he and his governess had worked on during his fabled eleventh summer, when his parents all but abandoned him at their estate. In Hammer's typically fluent exegesis, we are told that his governess

speaks French with a German accent: only in adulthood would Merrill learn that her mother was English, her father German, and she "only French by marriage."... When she holds the boy at night, she soothes him in French and German in turn: "Patience, cheri. Geduld, mein schatz." Teaching him "her languages," she teaches him that there is no single mother tongue.

Nothing is single: not language, not nationality—and not even mothers! "Lost in Translation" concludes with a magical reversal: "all is translation." Despite his "dearth of ardor," Merrill turned life and love into art, and then showed that art gives us more love, more life. ■



PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS / AMERICAN LEGAL SCHOLAR



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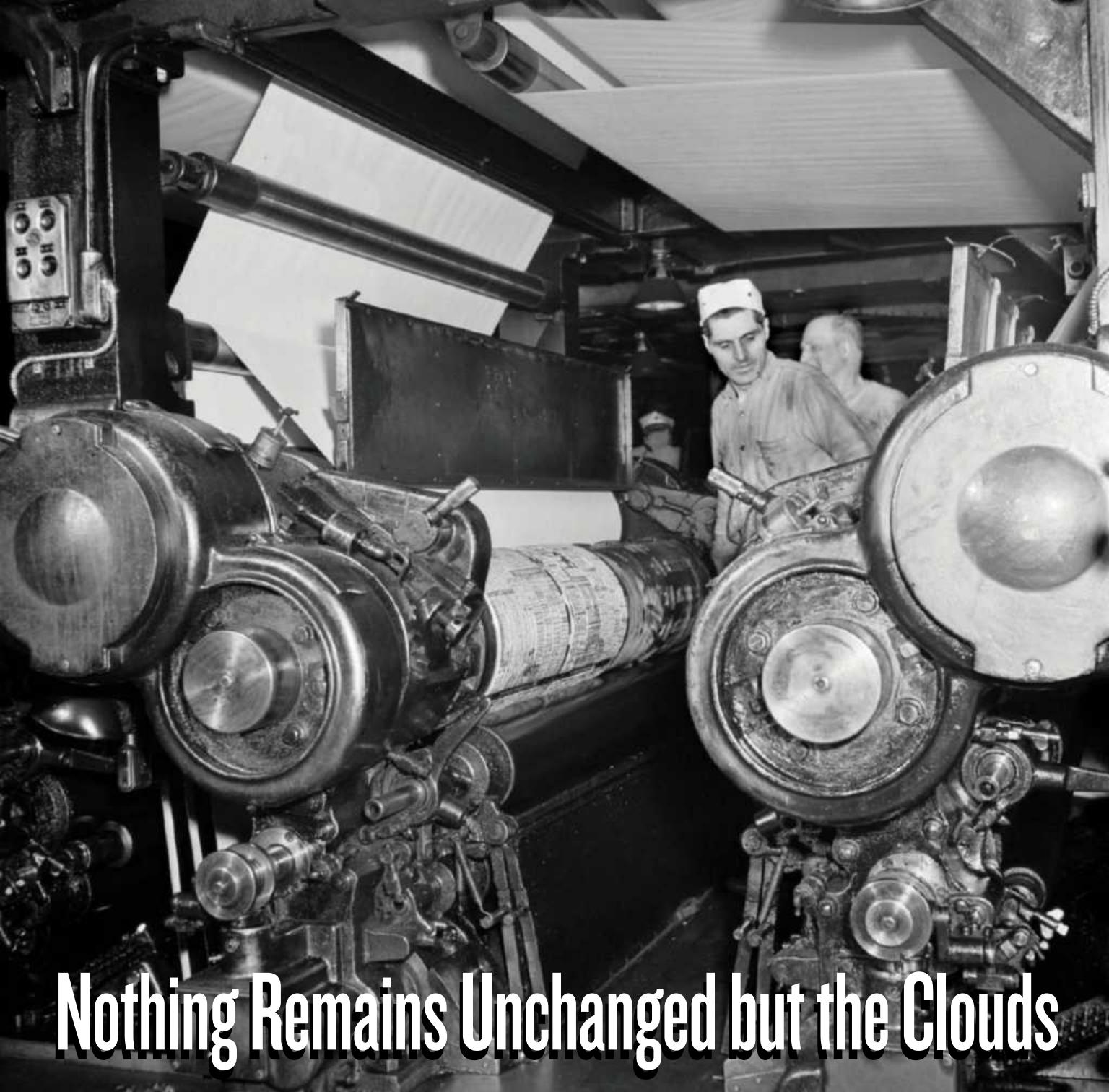
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Nothing Remains Unchanged but the Clouds

"At certain times of the day," wrote Karl Kraus, in a critique of the mass media taken up by Walter Benjamin, "a particular quantity of work has to have been procured and prepared for the machine."

by NEIMA JAHROMI

In 1921, the pioneering sexologist Charlotte Wolff described her young friend Walter Benjamin as a man with a face made for radio. "The rosy apple-cheeks of a child, the black curly hair and fine brow were appealing," she wrote, "but there was sometimes a cynical glint in his eyes. His thick sensuous lips, badly hidden by a moustache,

were also an unexpected feature, not fitting with the rest. His posture and gestures were 'uptight' and lacked spontaneity, except when he spoke of things he was involved in or people he loved." In short, he liked when people could hear him, but he wasn't much to look at. Nor did Benjamin have much interest in seeing others. Susan Sontag, who called him "almost handsome," spun a whole essay out of his unsociable demeanor. In his later years, Benjamin recalled the way the telephone

flourished in the homes of his peers, the first generation to grow up with the new tool. "It became a consolation for their loneliness," he observed. "To the despondent who wanted to leave this wicked world, it shone with the light of a last hope." Is it really any surprise that not long after another technology, the radio, was introduced in Germany in 1923, the homey critic and scholar, guarded but talkative, began telling stories on the airwaves?

One Monday afternoon in 1930, Ben-

Neima Jahromi is on the editorial staff of The New Yorker.

jamin brought his sensuous lips close to a microphone in a Berlin radio station and told an audience of adolescents and some adults about an artist named Theodor Hosemann. A dimly remembered painter of the 19th century, Hosemann illustrated street scenes in Berlin: a dandy in a top hat absorbed in a newspaper, workers laying pipe for the city's first streetlights, a woman leaning into a carriage for a kiss. The broadcast focused on laborers—"the common people," Benjamin called them—and on Hosemann's encounters with lithography, a recent invention that let the artist quickly and cheaply print his scenes in books small enough to carry in a pocket. Their size made them easy to conceal from government censors on the lookout for subversive messages that even illiterate "common people" might see.

In many ways, Benjamin and Hosemann, the two Berliners, led very different lives. Hosemann never traveled far and was buried in the city; Benjamin never stayed anywhere for long and, in 1940, after a failed attempt to escape Europe, took his own life near the French-Spanish border. But the world around them churned in a similar way. They both witnessed the calamities of war, the glimmer of democracy extinguished by censorship, and the ascent of new technologies to reproduce art and information. The thinkers of their day pondered similar questions: Should one address only the headline events of history and high culture, battles and coronations? Or was it OK, thanks to the flow of words and pictures from mechanized news outlets, to lean back on the divan and enjoy the urban adventures of pipe layers, too?

Most accounts of Benjamin's life paint him in a historical tableau, a tragic hero caught in the battle between continental Europe's bohemian intelligentsia and the fascism that ultimately crushed it. They don't bother to fill in the ground-level culture, Benjamin's everyday work, his idle fascinations. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, whose *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* is the most comprehensive biography of the melancholy writer to appear in English, devote many pages to his more mandarin texts for scholarly readers—and even quite a bit of attention to his romantic entanglements and predilection for collecting old toys—but they skirt his more pedestrian radio broadcasts for a popular audience. In considering his legacy, Benjamin himself dismissed the importance of these broadcasts, even though, as Eiland and Jennings point out, when he considered other intellectual figures like Heinrich Heine, mostly known for his poetry, he would take the contrary route and

Discussed in This Essay

Walter Benjamin

A Critical Life.

By Howard Eiland and

Michael W. Jennings.

Harvard/Belknap. 755 pp. \$39.95.

Radio Benjamin

By Walter Benjamin.

Edited by Lecia Rosenthal.

Translated from the German by

Jonathan Lutes.

Verso. 394 pp. \$29.95.

focus on their more prosaic interests (literary journalism, in Heine's case, a form that he helped popularize in the 19th century). The Zionist historian Gershom Scholem, who knew Benjamin as a fellow student and would later edit collections of his writings, noted after his friend's death that the broadcasts for children "contain sediments of his decidedly original way of seeing." Luckily, despite their author's dismissal, most of the radio transcripts survived, hidden in various archives, and are now available in English translation in the recently published *Radio Benjamin*. There is much to hear, and to see.

Benjamin's six years on the airwaves were the only time he worked with technologies that he believed could have revolutionary potential. He wasn't alone in this idea, even if not everyone shared his optimism. In 1927, the year of his first broadcast, the US Congress passed a bill intended, as the media historian Mark Goodman argues, to guard against the possibility that radio could be used to stoke social upheaval or to "monopolize opinions." Benjamin acknowledged the dangerous conformist tendencies of the new platforms, but he also noted, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, that they made certain philosophical truths more apparent. In his most famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," he explained that by making art from bits of debris like subway tickets and cigarette butts, the Dadaists had tried to achieve "the effects which the public today seeks in film." In both media, rearrangements of the fragmentary experiences of modern life were rendered a little less alienating. A factory worker who only tightens bolts on an assembly line might lose sight of how the widgets are made. A scene of Charlie Chaplin writhing through all the machinery at least dramatizes the greater

process and reveals the existential messiness of his labor. When the audience laughs instead of cowering, Benjamin suggested, it's a small act of revenge.

Going to the movies, Benjamin argued, potentially fostered the class-consciousness that Karl Marx said could be built on the factory floor. In the cinema, it was the consciousness of a mass of people staring at the same images. These masses, too, were getting bigger. Between the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s and the start of the 20th century, the number of Europeans more than doubled. Tenements went up, and the sewers beneath them swelled with waste. Writers from Balzac to Baudelaire sought to understand these new masses, identifying different city-dwelling types—clerks, civil servants, street urchins—as a way to lend distinct faces to the crowd. Novelists and poets also crafted characters who embodied the wariness that many felt when confronted with the growing hordes. In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, published in 1843, Ebenezer Scrooge is told of the poor who will die if they don't receive charitable aid and applauds this "decrease" in the "surplus population." The anxiety festered into the 20th century, but the attitude had evolved. Political leaders now dreamed up sophisticated ways to control the rabble, using Bugs Bunny and *Triumph of the Will* to direct their attention and motives. In a four-panel cartoon from 1933 by the satirical illustrator O. Garvens, Adolf Hitler regards a sculpture of people wrestling with one another, a kind of metaphor for the intractable struggles of democracy. As a horrified intellectual looks on, Hitler smashes it with his fist and reshapes the clay into a single muscular citizen.

Benjamin, though, wasn't an artist seeking a uniform body politic. He often said that the best kind of media galvanized an articulate mass of amateur commentators, ready and able to speak their minds. In a posthumously published essay included in *Radio Benjamin*, he observes that "every child recognizes that it is in the interest of radio to bring anyone before the microphone at any opportunity." The audience should have a place to tell the radio station "what is expected of it, what will be appreciated, what will not be forgiven." Cultivating in listeners a language of response and a platform to express their criticisms of the station "would not only improve the standard of its programming, it would also have the audience on its side, as experts. And nothing is more important than that."

It seems possible that Benjamin would have been at ease in a world of Twitter

mobs and TV recaps. A good philosopher, he thought, can make use of this kind of synopsizing and criticism as a springboard to leap toward the truth. Benjamin may also have thrived with a smartphone in his hand. Sociologists like Sherry Turkle often bemoan the hives of isolated people who keep in touch through Facebook and text messages instead of looking each other in the eye; but Benjamin, when he was feeling cheerful enough, loved communicating with large, like-minded audiences about as much as he enjoyed being alone.

Benjamin lived on the rim of what Columbia University law professor Tim Wu calls “the Cycle.” Every new information technology, whether it uses radio waves, telegraph wires, or Ethernet cables, passes “through a phase of revolutionary novelty and youthful utopianism” and ends up “a highly centralized and integrated new industry.” Benjamin scrambled to figure out how to bend new technologies and their effects to his intellectual purposes in a culture where they had become indispensable. Near the beginning of his life, and at many points along the way to his untimely death, he worried, as some of us do, about whether the trade-offs inherent in the Cycle wiped out too much and preserved too little. At times like these, he usually fell to ruminating, not on history as a parade of events, but on something less fixed: constellations of the present and the past.

The philosopher, as a little boy, hated going to school. “A mob of school children is among the most formless and ignoble of all masses,” he recalled. Benjamin preferred to stroll the city streets with his mother and absorb the panorama of Berlin’s transformation: horse-drawn carriages retired in favor of automobiles, department stores erected and old Prussian houses brought down, the collapse of the Second Reich and the rise of the Weimar Republic. “Nothing remained unchanged but the clouds,” he wrote.

At home, his father, a Jewish art and antiquities dealer, endowed Benjamin with sophisticated tastes and manners. The elder Benjamin had lived in Paris, a city whose modernization preceded Berlin’s by half a century. And, unsurprisingly, when his son ascended to higher education, he studied the luminaries who explored the traumatic density and speed of urban life. Benjamin would later collect their observations, along with those of more pedestrian authors, and assemble them in *The Arcades Projects*, his unfinished survey of 19th-century modernity. Victor Hugo on the Parisian sewage system: “All manner of

phantoms haunt these long solitary corridors, putridity and miasma everywhere.” Friedrich Engels on the crowded streets of London: “No man thinks to honor another with so much as a glance.” Baudelaire on the working-class ragpicker: “He collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic.”

In an early chapter of their book, Eiland and Jennings describe a contentious article on European intellectuals that resonated with Benjamin’s feelings as a young Jewish scholar. Appearing in the art and culture magazine *Der Kunstmwart* a few months before he turned 20, the article claimed that Semitic thinkers excavated and celebrated the literary and philosophical work of a society that treated them like cultural chaff. “We Jews,” the author argued, “govern the intellectual possessions of a people that denies us the right to do so.”

That denial didn’t stop Benjamin from moving swiftly to the forefront of the German education-reform movement the following year, even as his nervousness around groups persisted. He was called to speak in the fall of 1913, and Scholem noticed from his seat in the crowd that Benjamin “delivered his absolutely letter-perfect speech with great intensity to an upper corner of the ceiling, at which he stared the whole time.” Despite his shyness, the attention he received for his thought was addictive. As the president of the Berlin Independent Students’ Association, he gave a talk on the importance of developing a cultured community that would stand up for the masses of the poor. Benjamin’s future wife, Dora Sophie Pollak, was overcome with emotion and rushed forward with a bouquet of roses.

Benjamin sought romance with a zeal—in intellectual circles, brothels, and among his friends’ partners—but Dora and others who knew him intimately regarded the philosopher as a kind of brain only fitfully attached to his body. “All disgust is originally disgust at touching,” Benjamin wrote in his book of essays, *One-Way Street*. At the outbreak of World War I, two of his friends committed suicide and Benjamin fell further into himself. He broke with the youth movement, faked illness to avoid conscription, and hid away in Switzerland with Dora until his country surrendered. By the early 1920s, Benjamin had shed even the pretense of the populism he had championed before the war, declaring that he wanted to convey “how impossible it is in our age to give voice to any communality.” But despite isolating depression and financial hardship, his misanthropy would soon thaw, thanks to new relationships. He met thinkers like Siegfried

Kracauer, an aesthetic philosopher who, along with Benjamin, would help turn pop culture into an area of serious study, and Asja Lacis, a Soviet intellectual from Latvia who put her leftist energies into children’s plays.

Benjamin first encountered Lacis on the island of Capri, where he spent six months in 1924 sunbathing with his colleagues. He watched her from a distance for weeks, waiting for her husband to leave the island. As she tried to buy almonds from a local shop, he made his approach and clumsily helped to carry her groceries back to her house. Still married to Dora, who remained in Germany, Benjamin fell in love with Lacis and doggedly pursued her for the rest of the decade. Under her sway, his affinity for the masses started to resurface.

He even made his way, unannounced, to her doorstep in Latvia, where he found Lacis putting on her plays. After one particularly subversive performance, the unruly audience nearly crushed Benjamin before he managed to scramble onto a window ledge. Lacis, as Eiland and Jennings write, “recalled that the only thing that had pleased him about the play was a scene in which a gentleman in a top hat chatted with a worker under an umbrella; in which direction Benjamin’s sympathies may have run during the scene,” they add, “is a matter of conjecture.” This snide denouement to the story—suggesting that Benjamin favored the aristocrat over the plebeian—is typical of the way that Eiland and Jennings comment on the philosopher’s life, advancing the notion that he was a pinkie-out patrician at heart. But to judge from his writings and the preponderance of details that the biographers themselves unearth, Benjamin probably favored the scene because two worlds had come together. He often wanted to be isolated physically, but he hated isolation conceptually, whether it was in the artistic media, on an assembly line, or among classes. In other words, his sympathies likely ran both ways.

Benjamin’s avant-garde friends, many of whom he’d met through Lacis, rode on waves of Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, and they nurtured in the young philosopher a taste for the 19th-century detritus—shop signs, skin-lotion ads, old dolls, train sets—that he eventually came to believe could yield philosophical insight. Always restless, Benjamin collected these objects as he explored Europe in the sunset of its industrial age. Everything solid inspired him. In 1925, lying on the deck of a ship, he listened to the cranes unloading cargo and called it “the modernized ‘music of the world.’” The following year, in December, he went to Russia and saw a country deeply enmeshed in the

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Soviet experiment. "Each thought, each day, each life lies here as on a laboratory table," he observed. "Employees in their factories, offices in buildings, pieces of furniture in the apartments are rearranged, transferred, and shoved about." The Bolshevik Party, dissecting every activity for social tinkering, let private life dry up. "In this ruling passion," Benjamin wrote, with typical ambivalence, "there is as much naive desire for improvement as there is boundless curiosity and playfulness." He walked the icy streets of Moscow, keeping his eyes on his footing as people pushed one another to get by.

Benjamin had a fondness for travel and meeting new minds, but in the ripening world of literary journals and, especially, new mass-media technologies like radio and film, he found a place to trade ideas with the world without physically interacting with anyone in it. "In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad," he thought as he took refuge from the Russian winter in the movie theater. "Or rather, they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film." On the editing-room floor, all the

isolated corners of Russian life could mix. Quick cuts playfully responded to the coldness of Soviet science.

By the late 1920s, radio had overtaken film and newspapers as the predominant source for information. In 1929, after a friend of his, Ernst Schoen, became artistic director of a radio station in Frankfurt, Benjamin began giving regular radio broadcasts. There being few templates for how to present his stories, he started to invent some. One broadcast suggested the best way to ask for a raise during the Great Depression. It was called "A Pay Raise?!" Whatever Gave You That Idea!" (A line from the script: "Are you suggesting that a single, lousy individual has the power, all on his own, to transform his life into a better one?")

Benjamin also produced a series of 20-minute segments for children. Seemingly intended to entertain them with aspects of everyday life and history in Berlin, Schoen and Benjamin subtly turned the descriptions to their own particular tune of thought. Benjamin took listeners on a tour of a factory that made machine parts: "The noise is deafening yet you barely see anyone." He told them about the history of puppeteers, mentioning the ire they drew, "first from the church and the authorities, because puppets can so easily mock everything without being malicious." He recounted the history of tenement housing in Berlin, pausing in his tale to let one visitor note, "Europe must be a very small land indeed if the people have so little space on the ground that they must live in the air."

The new technologies that attended modernity, radio and film included, frightened many Berliners. Benjamin crafted stories that cast their fears in a historical light. In a 1932 broadcast about a railway accident, he mentioned 19th-century medical professors who warned people away from the new locomotives. "The rapid motion would scramble people's brains," they said. One man, Benjamin told his listeners, felt uneasy in a boxcar for a more subtly psychological reason: "He didn't regard it as travelling at all; it was like 'being sent somewhere.'"

Later radio stories appear to reflect Benjamin's growing sense of the impending catastrophe about to swallow Europe. In 1931 and '32, Benjamin recounted the volcanic eruption that smothered Pompeii, the 18th-century earthquake that destroyed the capital of Portugal, and the decision to flood the land of poor farmers in the Mississippi River Valley in order to save the port city of New Orleans. His turn toward disaster might also have been spurred by the financially and emotionally ruinous outcome of the divorce

The Idea of Houses

I sold my earrings at the gold store to buy a silver ring in the market. I swapped that for old ink and a black notebook. This was before I forgot my pages on the seat of a train that was supposed to take me home. Whenever I arrived in a city, it seemed my home was in a different one.

Olga says, without my having told her any of this, "Your home is never really home until you sell it. Then you discover all the things you could do with the garden and the big rooms—as if seeing it through the eyes of a broker. You've stored your nightmares in the attic and now you have to pack them in a suitcase or two at best." Olga goes silent then smiles suddenly, like a queen among her subjects, there in the kitchen between her coffee machine and a window with a view of flowers.

Olga's husband wasn't there to witness this regal episode. Maybe this is why he still thinks the house will be a loyal friend when he goes blind—a house whose foundations will hold him steady and whose stairs, out of mercy, will protect him from falls in the dark.

I'm looking for a key that always gets lost in the bottom of my handbag, where neither Olga nor her husband can see me, drilling myself in reality so I can give up the idea of houses.

Every time you go back home with the dirt of the world under your nails, you stuff everything you were able to carry with you into its closets. But you refuse to define home as the future of junk—a place where dead things were once confused with hope. Let home be that place where you never notice the bad lighting, let it be a wall whose cracks keep growing until one day you take them for doors.

IMAN MERSAL
(translated from the Arabic by Robyn Creswell)

proceedings he initiated against his wife in 1929—part of a failed attempt to improve his relationship with his Soviet girlfriend. The court awarded Dora his entire inheritance. Benjamin drafted suicide notes to his closest friends, but he never sent them.

On January 29, 1933, in his final broadcast, not long before he would leave Germany for the last time, Benjamin described his childhood in Berlin. “The next day,” Lecia Rosenthal writes in the introduction to *Radio Benjamin*, “Hitler was appointed chancellor, and the Nazi torchlight parade was sent out over the airwaves as the very first nationwide live broadcast.” Book burnings began, and there were boycotts of Jewish businesses, but almost equally horrifying to Benjamin, his contacts in the literary and journalistic world started to fall away. His career as a radio broadcaster ended.

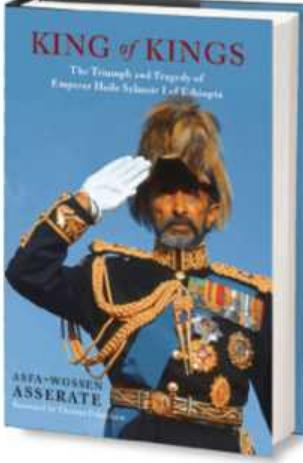
Many of Benjamin’s friends fled the country. Benjamin smoked opium and tried to relax, but he soon found himself short on funds and without enough food. He grew exhausted and feverish. Sores began to appear on his right leg, and he contracted malaria. In dire straits, he took a train to Paris, where he lived in cheap hotels and, later, in tiny rooms and apartments. He also spent time in Denmark in the company of Bertolt Brecht, who encouraged Benjamin’s high-concept populism. The two thinkers met in Brecht’s garden to play chess, talked about the revolutionary tendency of Charlie Chaplin films, and convened around the radio in the playwright’s home. “I was able to listen to Hitler’s Reichstag speech,” Benjamin wrote to a friend, “and because it was the very first time I had ever heard him, you can imagine the effect.”

In 1935, back in France, Benjamin again took comfort in the collective solitude of movie theaters and began to put his thoughts together for his “Work of Art” essay, in which he would consider how the popular cinema could be a site of social change. The year before, he also wrote out a scene or two from his time in the radio booth. The “listener is almost always a solitary individual,” a mentor told him on his first day, “and even if you were to reach a few thousand of them, you are always only reaching thousands of solitary individuals.”

When war lurched up at the end of the decade, Benjamin and thousands of French citizens purchased gas masks. “A disturbing double of those skulls with which studious monks decorated their cells,” he wrote. As more people he knew either escaped or took their own lives, “the isolation that is my natural condition has increased,” he told

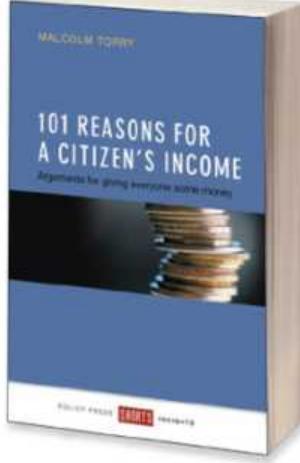
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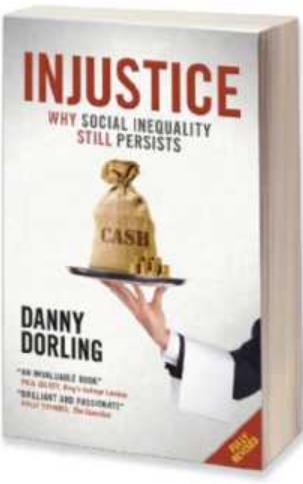


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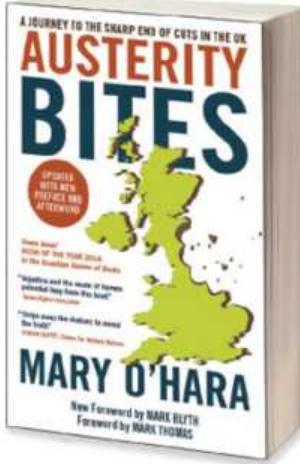
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Scholem, who was safe in Palestine. Soon enough, with Nazi soldiers pouring across the French border with Belgium, Benjamin and his gas mask boarded a train heading south. In a letter to his friend Theodor Adorno, already living in the United States, he wrote of hearing “the voice of fateful tidings in every radio broadcast.”

Many people today think we are drowning in ideas, ones that, whether intended to entertain or critique, are derivative or poorly considered. Now and again, spats break out over the dreaded “think piece,” which draws together whatever a few fellow journalists have discussed on Twitter the night before and, with a smattering of light reflection and a dull historical point or two, pretends to insight. Our thoughts are shallow and gasping for breath, our attention spans brutally short. Experts seem to have disappeared, because Google and Wikipedia feed the illusion that everyone sits one web search away from becoming perfectly informed on anything. Our potential Kafkas are too distracted or deluded to pen their subtle denunciations of modernity. You can almost hear Scrooge lifting his gray head and muttering that something must be done about our surplus population of ideas.

In European society during the early 20th century, with the maturation of culture and opinion journalism in the booming German and French magazine industries, a similar kind of grumbling arose. Enter Karl Kraus, a Viennese satirist who lived off a comfortable pile of inherited money. He was an intellectual forefather to Benjamin and his friends, and the era’s most vocal Scrooge. Kraus—or the Great Hater, as he was known—ran and, eventually, wrote every word of a literary magazine called *Die Facke*. In its pages, he became a mash-up of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, pointing out the hypocrisies of lazy-minded politicians and mimicking the press outlets that turned their sound bites into arguments. Unlike Benjamin, Kraus loved appearing before crowds. His public manner was especially Colbertian; Benjamin noted that when Kraus spoke before an audience, he would cross the “room with swift, restless bounds to reach the lecture podium.”

The arc of Kraus’s media derision loosely follows the progression of our attitude, toward journalistic culture in recent decades. In much the same way that the mock newspaper The Onion spawned the mock website ClickHole to deride the sudden dominance of listicles and think pieces, Kraus, in the words of Ohio State professor Paul Reitter, “went from being a journalist against

journalism to being a literary journalist against literary journalism.” He argued that the only thing worse than believing in fair and balanced reporting was believing that impressionistic journalism, with its literary flourishes and philosophical trimmings, was any better. Journalism was too topical, too hurried, too fettered by power for genuine thought.

Benjamin, at least superficially, seemed to agree. In a 1930 essay on fascism, he refers to “the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic power of technology and the minuscule moral illumination it affords.” The next year, at the height of his own journalistic output on the radio, Benjamin published an essay in the prestigious *Frankfurter Zeitung*, lauding Kraus’s gripes about mass media and quoting them at length:

At certain times of day—twice, three times in the bigger newspapers—a particular quantity of work has to have been procured and prepared for the machine. And not from just any material: everything that has happened in the meantime, anywhere, in a region of life, politics, economics, art, etc., must now have been reached and journalistically processed.

To this Benjamin adds that every trifling bit of cultural writing “poses anew the insoluble question of the relationship between the forces of stupidity and malice, whose expression is gossip.” Kraus felt smothered by the empty phrases and low blows of cultural journalism. His solution was to mock them: He often merely culled and quoted newspaper headlines and sentences that appeared ridiculous under the slightest examination. Benjamin admired the impulse to pull the baser elements of these everyday observations out of their native context, but not for the same reasons that Kraus did. As the 1930s progressed and Nazism performed a kind of cultural culling of its own, Benjamin would begin to explain why.

Media glut and anxiety about it are not any more unique to our age than they were to the information culture of Weimar Germany or high-brow Vienna. In the fourth century BCE, Plato tried to define his perfect city not long after the spread of writing in Athenian society. Good poets could stay, the philosopher suggested, but the “imitative” ones had to leave. Similarly, in the early 17th century, 100 years after the ascent of movable type, Cervantes satirized the way that the piles of poorly written chivalric romances produced by the thriving Renaissance publishing industry could corrupt the mind of an idle person

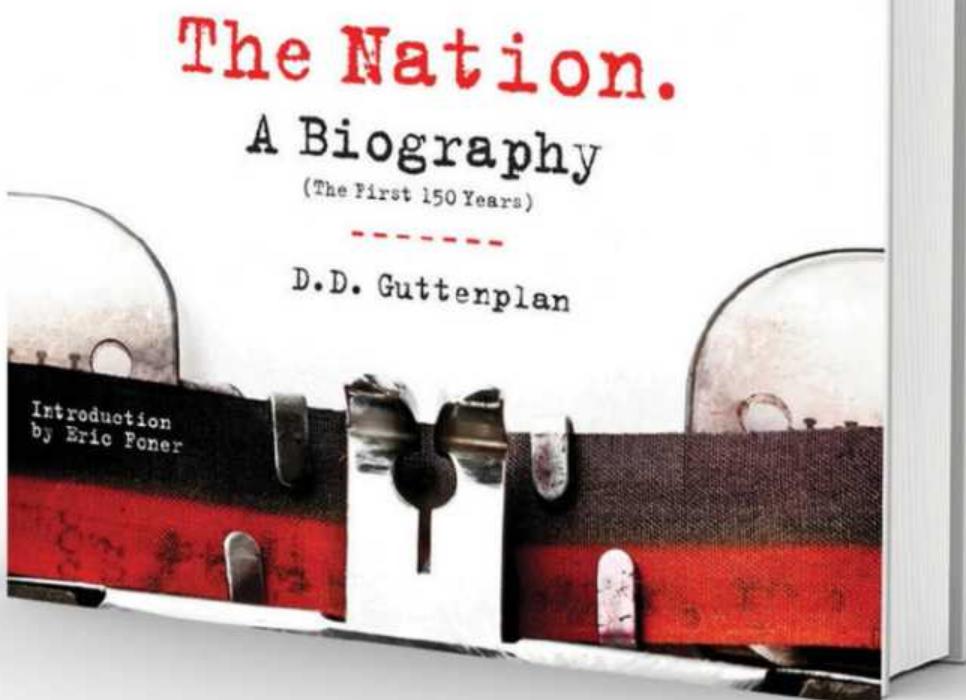
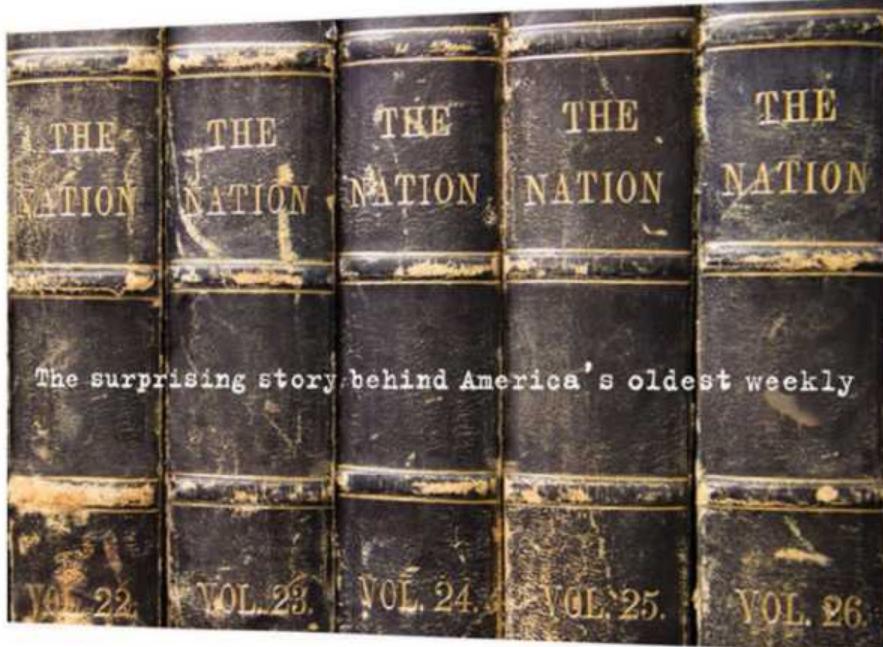
like Don Quixote. But he also pilloried the seeming judiciousness of those who thought that life would be better if only these books were done away with. In an early chapter, Don Quixote’s neighbors, a priest and a barber, build a fire to destroy his vast library. But they reject the idea of burning everything and start going through the volumes one by one. The first Spanish book of chivalry is spared (“as a unique example of the art, it should be pardoned”); a series of others, for their “perverse and complicated language” and unbelievable characters, are consigned to the flames (and “I would burn along with them the father who sired me if he were to appear in the form of a knight errant,” the priest adds).

In 1916, the young Benjamin praised Cervantes’s method—“only by becoming humor can language become critique”—and would render similar scenes on the radio. In one of his most popular broadcasts, “What the Germans Were Reading While Their Classical Authors Were Writing,” he notes that 18th-century Germans discussed mountains of second-rate literature in the same breath as the works then being composed by their great masters. After an academic claims that newspapers belong in the hands of even the least-educated people, a pastor named Grunelius remarks, “I am better placed than anyone to survey the appalling epidemic of reading to which our public has fallen prey.... The bourgeois girl who belongs in the kitchen is reading her Schiller and Goethe in the hallway.”

Benjamin took up the idea again late in his life, albeit with a much more somber tone. Among a collection of fragments under the title “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” he argues that any cultural historian who studies the landmark artistic achievements of the past must see that “they owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries.” In September 1939, without bothering to check for Nazi affiliation, the French government hastily gathered up thousands of German and Austrian nationals of military age and confined them in houses scattered across the countryside. Benjamin began to compose his worries about anonymous toil not long after he was released from one of these internment camps. To the “horror” of the historian, Benjamin went on, the cultural treasures that survive are those that please history’s champions. “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.”

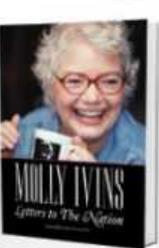
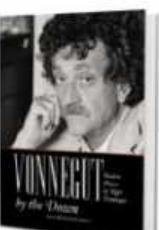
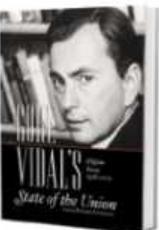
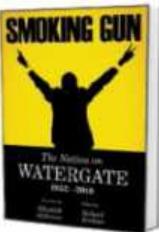
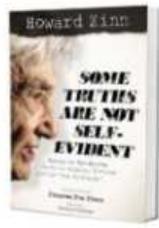
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In *A Christmas Carol*, the Ghost of Christmas Present admonishes Scrooge: “Forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is, and Where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die?” For Benjamin, in a time of Nazi book burnings but before the horrors of the Holocaust, when Jewish intellectual life, as Reitter points out, was under attack as an excess that corroded and impeded civil progress, a similar challenge could have been issued to those like Kraus—overwhelmed by the growing din of literature and thought—who wanted whole kinds of writing not to exist.

Benjamin shared this sentiment but knew its limits, too. Although he treasured what history had cast aside—in a Dada spirit, treating a clothespin with as much care as a Van Gogh—he thought that the swell of newspapers, newsreels, magazines, radio broadcasts, and wire services had degraded the kind of wisdom gained from tradition and personal experience. In its place had come an age not only of information but dominated by it. “No event comes to us without already being shot through with explanation,” he wrote. And in 1933, as Hitler took over the airwaves and Benjamin fled Berlin for exile in Paris, the writer decided that “with this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty descended on mankind. And the reverse side of this poverty is the oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely.”

But Benjamin still found something to appreciate in the bleaker side of modernity. Just as the balm for the oppressiveness of industrial life seemed to gestate first in esoteric art and later in popular media—what came into relief at the hands of Dadaists later appeared, as Benjamin wrote, “in a more natural way” in Chaplin films—a similar response arose to the slings and arrows of mass media. Benjamin, like Kraus, suggested the practice of quoting fleeting ideas from the mill of academic and journalistic thinking and presenting them out of context. He especially favored mixing these quotations with his own thoughts in strings of chaotically arranged fragments—or “montage,” as he called it—like his “Theses of History” or *One-Way Street* essays. But unlike Kraus, Benjamin didn’t intend to discard these quickly forgotten products of the opinion industry, nor did he want to make them seem any more historically relevant than they really were. Instead, he wanted to reveal the violent process by which some ideas linger and others are left behind, to show that what seems pure

today will seem muddled tomorrow, and to demonstrate how easy and necessary it is to constellate and reconstellate the present and the past. Fascism saw a future that was held in place by an easily discernible train of events. Benjamin, conceptually at least, wanted to hit the brakes. Arguably, the more “natural” path would not be found until anyone with an Internet connection could collage information on Facebook and Twitter.

Kraus would have scoured website comment sections with gleeful rage. Benjamin would have cast his eyes around them with an energetic pleasure. He might even have been excited by the proliferation of sites where anyone can become an author—although Twitter by itself does not presage a revolution. Such opportunity has to be coupled with a society of inspired and engaged people, as Benjamin writes in “The Author as Producer”:

An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.

With the arrival of these collaborators through the avenues of social media, Benjamin inclines us to recognize how something abstract has become concrete. The eerie interplay between what we think of as

our authentic selves and our socially defined selves once took the dramatic struggling of a Hamlet to reveal. The sad Danish prince, like a desperate reality star, finds it impossible to remove his “antic disposition” once he puts it on. Now anyone trying to curate their identity through social media can see how the monster they’ve made might turn on them. Film brought the masses and their consumer goods to the surface in a stream of thousands of images. Likewise, the Internet has allowed our masks to emerge in visible form by building its residue out of light on a screen. We realize now, as the stories of lives ruined by Twitter mobs circulate, how our identities have been as much in our own hands as in the hands of others.

Benjamin’s resolve that worthwhile truths could be found in technologically mediated experience only grew stronger as fascism dug its claws deeper into Europe. He published the first version of his “Work of Art” essay in 1936, praising certain products of the high-tech entertainment industry half a decade after sneering at technology in his essay on the horrors of fascism. But it wasn’t a sign of progress in Benjamin’s thought; the thinker could sneer and praise at the same time, seeing beauty in what was then useless and, in what had become far too useful, the terror of its importance. Avant-garde films or slapstick comedies, high art or kitsch, profound philosophizing or entertaining radio stories—they all took root in his life and work. Should he study European culture or survive its killing fields? The tragedy was that he had to choose. ■

Bullets and Opium

by LIAO YIWU

Before the Tiananmen Square massacre, I was a rebel poet, volatile and impulsive, who liked picking fights and telling tall tales. I’d won more than 20 state literary prizes, and I figured that one day I would earn international fame in the literary world. But all my poems earned me was a stint in jail. That dreamy poet’s look was flayed from my face. Then I was released. It felt as though my world had been turned

Liao Yiwu is the author of *The Corpse Walker*. This essay was translated by Chenxin Jiang and is adapted from the introduction to *Bullets and Opium*, a book about the suppression of the Chinese democracy movement in 1989. It has not been published in China.

upside down and I’d been abandoned.

The massacre of thousands of students on June 4, 1989, was a turning point. Before June 4, being patriotic was in fashion, and everyone loved China. After June 4, everyone loved the renminbi. As a penniless former labor-camp inmate, I could tell people despised me. I got home and saw my wife, my parents, siblings, and old friends for the first time since jail. Upon seeing me again, my family seemed impassive, and there were none of the emotional scenes you read about in books. Born more than half a year after I was jailed, my daughter was now 3. She was scared of my shaved head and began to cry. Then she hid behind the door and whimpered, spitting at me.

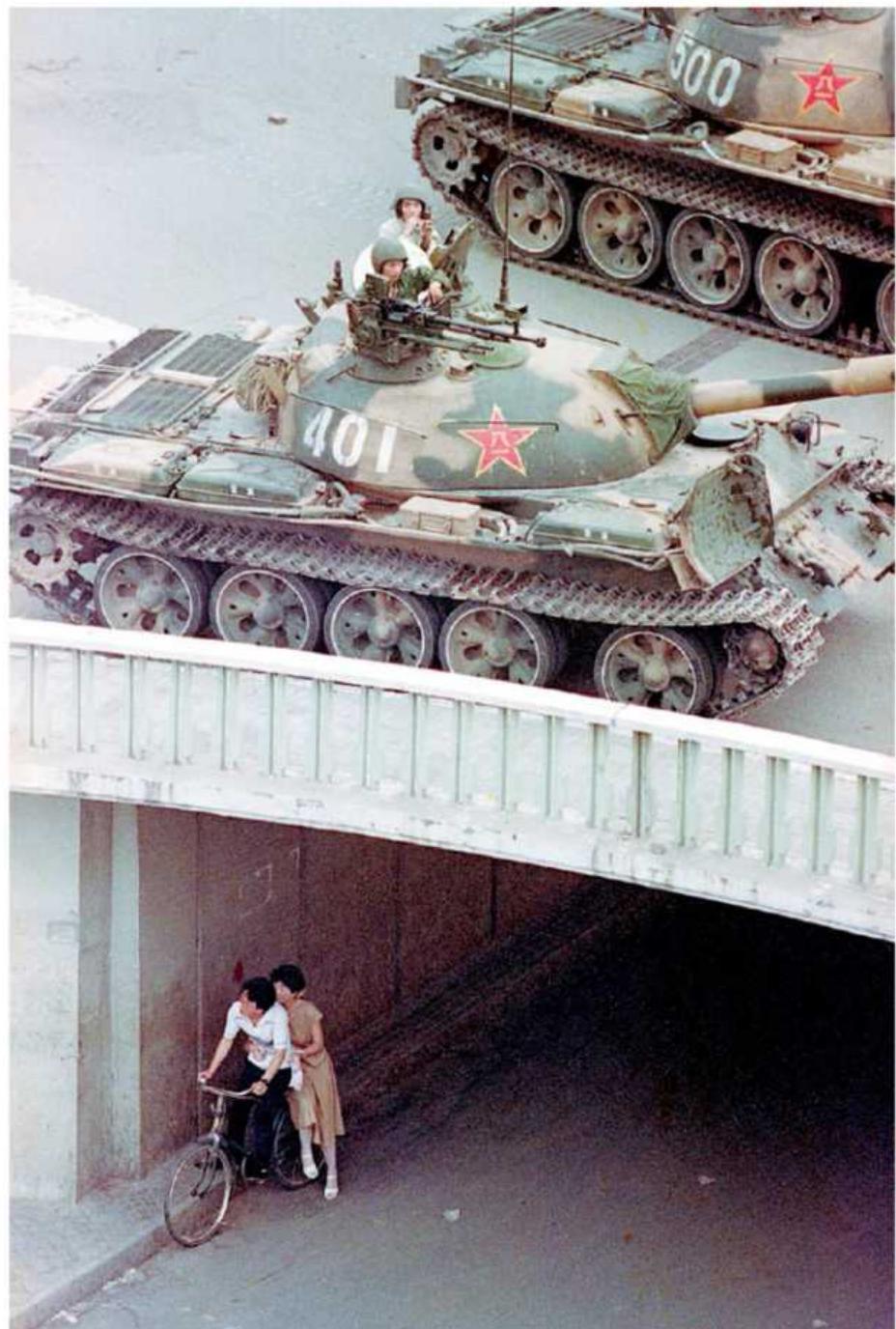
Men in prison are all, by definition, single. Many of my fellow inmates hadn't seen a woman in years or decades. Everyone talked about sex all the time, even the political prisoners with their supposedly lofty ideals. It was our default subject of conversation. The only difference between ordinary criminals and political prisoners was that when the former steamed up the cell with one of their group masturbation sessions, the political prisoners had to either pretend they didn't notice a thing or slip away quietly. I once shared a bunk bed with a man who was in for human trafficking. Whenever the prisoners got a special treat at dinner, he would jerk off that night. Sometimes he made the whole bed shudder, and I would rap on the iron bed frame in protest. The man on the lower bunk would yell up to me without missing a beat: "Hey, if you don't use it, you'll lose it!"

I scoffed then, but upon my release, I realized that I had indeed lost it. That part of the longed-for reunion with my wife was underwhelming—in fact, it was over before it had even really started. She picked herself up and said, "I wasn't really in the mood, but I figured we'd have to since you were home."

The blank look on my face hid my inner turmoil. I quickly got dressed. Three months later, after a violent argument, we got divorced. I was distraught. Life beyond prison had turned out to be a living hell. What was I to do with my insatiable sex drive, sexual dysfunction, and politically suspect past? The world had moved on and left me behind. My former friends would answer the phone the first time I called, but they never answered a second time. Even those who were generous enough to treat me to dinner when we met would then vanish.

My wife had edited the entertainment weekly published by a Chengdu nightclub. She was afraid that my shaved inmate's head was too conspicuous, so she bought a wig and forced me to wear it. I once went to the club to pick her up because it was late and I was worried about her getting home safe. As soon as I entered the club, I ran into its co-managers. One was fat and the other was skinny, and they were both drunk. They were also old friends who used to be poets. Together we'd run an underground poetry zine that poked fun at the Party. They were both even more patriotic than I was, and during the 1989 student protests, they had recited their anticorruption poems publicly on campus. The night of June 4 found them on Tianfu Square in Chengdu, bringing food and water to the students tussling with military police, and ferrying the injured to hospital.

They recognized me right away. The



Beijing, China, June 5, 1989, one day after Chinese troops massacred pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square.

fat man seized my wig and cried, "What's this counterrevolutionary doing in disguise?" The thin man cried, "A girl for the counterrevolutionary!" I broke out in a cold sweat. They both laughed heartily and took me to a private party room for a drink.

A few hostesses came in and started up the karaoke machine. The fat man produced his wallet and gave them all 100-yuan tips as if he were handing out candy. "Do you still write poems?" the skinny man asked. "I haven't been able to—I guess I just don't feel like it," I said. "Well, if you do ever feel like

it, try changing your tune and writing poems that sing the praises of nightclubs, Chengdu nightlife, sexy women, and spicy hot pot," he said. "We can print your poems under a pseudonym in the entertainment magazine your wife edits."

I was still dumbfounded. "You guys used to be dirt-poor poets who couldn't even afford a decent bottle of beer," I said. "Where did you even find the money for this place? The rent alone must be costing you hundreds of thousands of yuan per year."

"Just take out a loan and you can spend all

you want," said the fat man. "There's someone I know at the bank who'll take the building and facilities as collateral. Unfortunately, the girls don't count as collateral."

"Being poor hasn't been socialist since Deng Xiaoping spoke up for economic reform on his imperial tour of South China back in 1992," said the thin man. "Protesting for democracy won't get us places. Money is what gets you places."

When my wife and I got home that night, I couldn't help observing how quickly the people we knew had switched sides after June 4. "Sour grapes?" my wife said. "Be a man, beat them at their own game." I said nothing, but that night I couldn't sleep. It was a cold winter

night. I didn't want to wake her, so I sat on the balcony for what seemed like hours. Eventually, I took out my bamboo flute, but I was so disheartened that I couldn't even get a sound out of it. I did, however, succeed in catching a cold. The following morning, I woke up with a hacking cough and wrote a letter to Liu Xia, my old friend and wife of the well-known political prisoner Liu Xiaobo:

Everything's fucked up. The woman you used to know has changed; she's completely focused on getting ahead. Then there's the question of taking care of our daughter, and the fact that I have nothing more to say to my friends. My wife complains

that she's 30-something years old and still doesn't have a place she can call home. She says I have to find a way of making money that will support our daughter. She despises our past, which is brave of her. My flute playing drives her crazy, so I've stopped playing it. Somewhere deep inside me I still love her, but I can't love her the way she wants to be loved.

When I'm sitting at home alone, these are the voices I hear talking in my head: How's it going? Shit. What do you mean? Fuck. Yeah, it's fucked up. You loser. I'm a husband! You're her dad! The nightclub. All you want is money! All I want is revolution!

My flute is supple and soft. Only at night can it slice through the air like a knife. Liu Xia, friend, will there come a day when I just can't keep playing it any longer? I'm really worried that one day I'll stop being able to play the flute altogether.

This letter was dated March 26, 1994. Not long thereafter, I separated from my wife and moved back to my parents' place on the other side of town, where they took care of me as if I were a child. I often had only a few coins in my pocket, with which I couldn't even leave the apartment. My older brother Damao lent me 10,000 yuan, which all went to child support. My daughter is now 21, but she was with me for less than two months altogether.

drifted aimlessly, playing the flute for a living, and working on an account of my life in prison whenever I could find time. Life before June 4 became a distant memory. The months passed uneventfully. I figured I was the unluckiest man alive. Even my secret-police minder felt sorry for me. One day he paid me a visit, announcing that he had found a vacant storefront and arranged for me to open a store selling clothes. I said I wouldn't know where to buy clothes, let alone how to sell them.

"What do you mean, you don't even know where to buy clothes?" he said. "I'll take you to the Lotus Pond Market for fake goods at North Gate train station. You'll be able to stock up on shirts, pants, and name-brand clothing tags in bulk. Buy a bundle, spray them with water, brush them down, shake out the creases, iron them carefully, and they'll look so shipshape that they might as well be the real thing. If you're good at talking up your wares, you can sell a shirt you bought for 10 yuan for 50 or 100. You'll be rich in no time!"

"Customers aren't idiots," I said.

Raising a Glass With an Arab Nationalist

The pianist was still droopy-eyed, her face as dark as the keys they left her to press for half a century, though she must have been white as an angel when they first strung her up in the heavy frame on the wall.

Here amid the sighs of Umm Kalthum and the local wine of uncertain vintage, I thought my courage might come through that door next to the bar. While the garçon read his tabloid, and I slid among my options like drop of dew on a bunch of grapes, an Arab nationalist made an entrance, his hair all white as if he'd just been fighting off an invasion of the midan down the street.

"The nation is on fire," he said, instead of good evening, and I started coughing from the smoke that suddenly engulfed me.

Intermittent barks from outside covered the sounds of sighing inside. The garçon would turn up the volume a notch for the Nightingale of the East, but the bitch's howling won the battle. Soon she'd give birth to a couple of pups at least around the back of the building.

The garçon should really stop the 1943 Rivoli record. Zakarriya Ahmad wouldn't like this medley of oud, dog barks, and coughing under a colonial-era roof.

I'd come back from a funeral that afternoon. A surgeon, just out of school, was waiting for me in a room he'd spent too much time tidying up.

But my courage never came through the door—the sordid side door that separates the women's room from the men's urinal.

IMAN MERSAL

(translated from the Arabic by Robyn Creswell)

"They may not be, but you've still got to tell yourself they are. Selling is a psychological battle."

"What if someone realizes they've been sold a knockoff?"

"You've just got to stick to your guns and insist that you'd never sell them a fake. If they really make a fuss and refuse to let it slide, then you give me a call."

"I'm not sure I want to run a business that wouldn't survive without police protection," I said wryly.

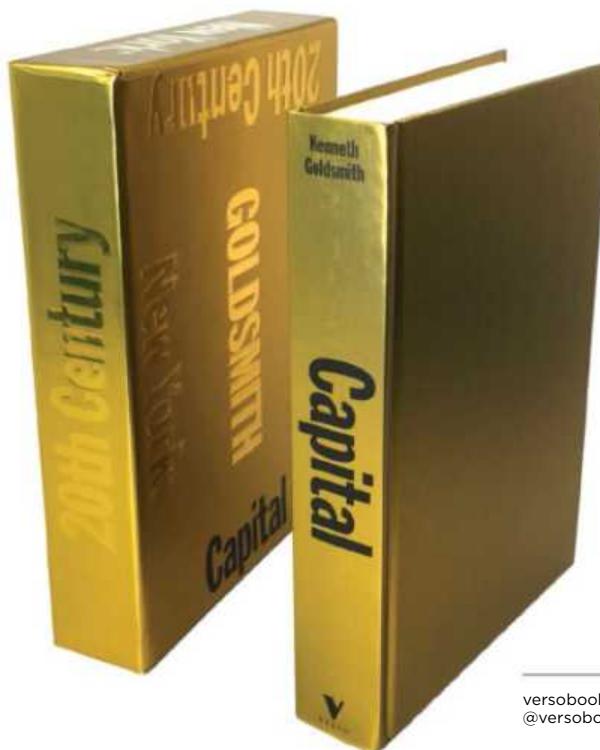
"Oh, if you can pull it off, there's real money to be made," he said. "I can get you a rent exemption for the first couple of years, and once the store really takes off, then you seize the opportunity and open a chain. Aim for 10 stores within five years, and 50 stores within 10 years. You'll have the leading clothing chain in town. If you take it one step further, hire a few more people, and open up your own factory churning out fakes of foreign brands and exporting them cheaply, you'll be the boss of a huge multinational company. Before you know it, even the Westerners will be shirtless and pantsless without you."

I laughed out loud, but as soon as I shut my mouth, I felt pathetic.

We drank late into the night and got completely wasted. One moment we were clapping each other on the back, and the next moment we'd be eyeing each other warily again. It was nearly dawn when we parted. "Think about it, Liao," he said. "It's not for me," I said. "You can keep your primrose paths. I'll stick to my single-log bridge."

That single-log bridge was the prison testimony I was writing in secret. Who could have guessed that one afternoon a year later, that very same man, my secret-police minder and drinking buddy, would come charging into my apartment with a gang of men? "This is a legal operation," he announced. He showed me his police ID and read out the search warrant. Then he and his men proceeded to search the place inch by inch: the bed, the table, the roof, the floor, and all the nooks and crannies that I usually didn't bother dusting. They opened every drawer and turned all my pockets inside out. Although my old watchdog Yuzui protested loudly, they tipped out the contents of his dog bed and inspected it. Every written word in the house was confiscated: letters, notes, a missing-dog flyer, and the manuscript of my nearly completed memoir. I signed the list of criminal evidence they had collected. Then I was put in a police van and interrogated at a nearby police station until nearly midnight. At which point, the same man who had urged me to take up a career in the pants industry came

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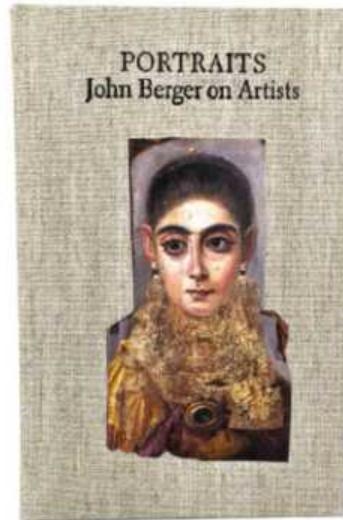


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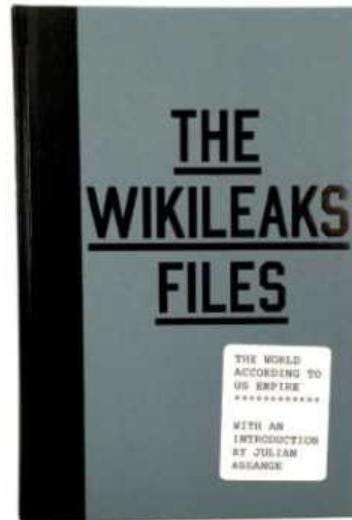
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"Reveals a profound hatred of democracy on the part of our political leadership."
—Noam Chomsky

to see me off. He shook my hand, patted me on the shoulder, and said, "You're not to leave your house for the next month."

I'd lost hundreds of thousands of words within the space of a night. Exhausted, I fell asleep cursing myself with every Sichuanese obscenity I knew. And then I started rewriting my testimony from scratch. I knew I didn't deserve anyone's sympathy—when we were

all trying to scrape together a living, no one had time to spare for my absurd woes—but the heavens felt sorry for me and made up for my misfortunes by sending me an angelic girlfriend, Songyu. She encouraged me and stuck by me during the most wretched time of my life. My premature ejaculation was gradually alleviated, but although I was rid of sexual dysfunction, my mental dysfunc-

tion persisted. I was restless and plagued by extreme mood swings. At night, when I performed in bars, I would often be talkative and subdued by turns. I once smashed a bottle on a drunkard's head in a bar fight that had to be recorded as a police incident.

I had fallen into the abyss of the urban underclass, which put me on a level with the city's many homeless people. I had no direction in life, and no freedom. "If your heart imprisons you, you'll never be free": That was something my bamboo-flute master used to say—and where was he now? I started drinking heavily. When I was drunk, I would curse China, curse the police, curse the Communist leaders Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng, the intellectual elite, the democracy activists in exile, and all the millions who had taken to the streets in 1989. Why on earth had I decided to recite my poem "Massacre" in the early morning of June 4? Had it been worth it? It was all very well to be killed for what you believed in, but I had been condemned to indefinitely eking out a miserable existence.

Then the secret police returned. Maybe they'd bugged my house; they always seemed to know where I'd been and to whom I'd spoken. They even seemed to have mysteriously penetrated my dreams: I had a recurring dream of escaping, of being able to flap my arms like wings and soar away. Exhausted by the exertion of flying, I slept curled up in a fetal position, as if I wanted nothing more than to return to my mother's womb, where I'd at least be free from surveillance. When I had nightmares, Songyu would wake me by shaking me gently, and hold me like a mother, until another nightmare of a day began.

What had brought the police to my door was the petition regarding "The Truth About June 4th" that fellow dissident Liu Xiaobo had sent me by fax. I had signed the blurred document without thinking and faxed it back. Two days later, I was taken away by the secret police without even realizing why and held in custody for 20 days. Songyu spent days outside the walls of the jail, trying to find out what was happening to me. When I got home, the first thing she said to me was: "If things go on like this, do we still have a future together?"

There was nothing I could say. The only words that came to mind were a line of a poem by Dylan Thomas: "On whom a world of ills came down like snow."

A few years later, I met Ding Zilin, whose son was killed in Tiananmen Square. She listened as I told my story, and then she said, "You're one of the lucky ones."

A few years later, I met Wu Wenjian, the

The Window

You can identify the one who broke apart, the one whose spine they managed to straighten, whose neck they stuck back on his shoulders.

From where you stand, drinking coffee and watching the passersby, you imagine the line of the vein they threaded from his wrist to his heart, you catch the glint of imported surgical pins in his knees.

You see how carefully he takes his steps, walking slowly, usually in a straight path. He'll never turn for you to see his eyes. This one is sealed tight.

It will be easier with one who scattered. The one who scattered often turns around, as though looking for a part he's still missing. When he turns around, he sometimes looks sweet, because they've patched him together with gum, or else somewhat bitter, from all the glue stuck between his limbs.

I don't think you can make out, from the window, the ones who are torn to pieces. There's really nothing to distinguish them!

Or else, each one looks just like himself—like canceled stamps unfixed from their envelopes that ended up in some philatelist's album.

IMAN MERSAL
(translated from the Arabic by Robyn Creswell)

artist who'd painted scenes of the massacre. Before I even finished telling my story, he said, "You're one of the lucky ones."

"Yes," I said. "At least compared to those who died."

No, they both said, also compared to others who survived.

Ding Zilin's son, Jiang Jielian, was only 17 in 1989, a high-school student swept up in the fervor of the patriotic student movement, who gave himself over to the street protests. On the night of June 3, he was shot in the chest and died before reaching the emergency room. His grieving parents decided to speak out about their family's ordeal and publicly accused the government of their son's murder. With Ding and her husband in the lead, those who had lost loved ones in the massacre spoke out one by one and became the Tiananmen Mothers movement. Now, 25 years later, the murderers still govern this country, while the parents who lost their children grow old and die under the gaze of the secret police.

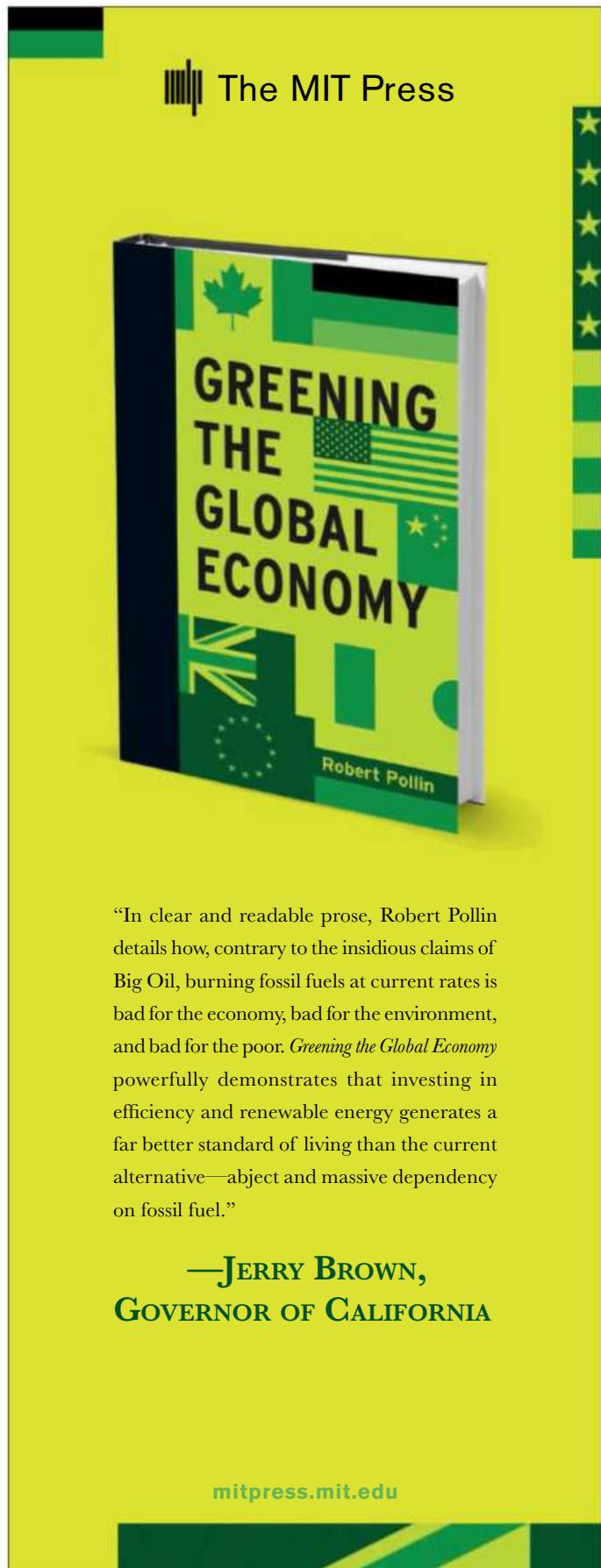
Wu Wenjian was only 19 in 1989, the same generation as the Dings' only child. Against his parents' wishes, he joined the street protests on the morning of June 4, and he was lucky that the bullet only grazed his scalp rather than piercing his heart. He published a speech he'd written expressing his outrage, titled "We Demand the Repayment of This Debt of Blood." It earned him a long spell in prison.

Wu Wenjian was the first of the street protesters I interviewed. Government propaganda referred to us as "thugs," he said. Well, the millions of unarmed "thugs" were up against fully armed military police that night. The government's tanks and armored vehicles cleared the way, crushing the barricades, and began to fire into the crowd. People started screaming. More shots rang out. More blood. Everywhere you looked, human beings were being mowed down like weeds.

The only protester people know about in the West is "Tank Man," the guy in that iconic photograph who stood in the street, physically blocking the oncoming column of tanks billowing exhaust like gigantic farting beetles. They kept trying to make their way around him, but he kept getting in their way. *You're steel, and I'm flesh and blood*, he seemed to be saying. *Come get me if you dare!* This moment was preserved for posterity because a foreign reporter happened to capture it on video. They say even Bush Sr. wept as he was watching the broadcast. But there were countless Tank Men whose deeds were not captured on camera.

The exiled writer Zheng Yi, who now lives in the United States, wrote in his memoirs: "At 9 PM on 3rd June, 1989, at Muxidi Bridge on West Chang'an Avenue, the crowds on the broad street linked arms to form a surging human wall two or three hundred meters deep. The slogans were deafening. The soldiers responsible for clearing the roads had helmets, shields, batons. They attacked the crowd mercilessly. The protesters fought back by throwing stones at them while retreating slowly. By 10 PM, the crowd had retreated onto the overpass, and the two sides were separated by a barricade of cars. The troops dared not circle past the streetcars to attack the crowds directly, so they sent their tanks to the front line."

Another witness wrote: "One tank drove at full speed towards the streetcars blocking the overpass. But under the direction of a few people standing higher up, several thousand people rushed toward the wall of streetcars just as the tank was speeding toward it, on the count of 'One... two... three!' There was a terrific crashing sound, but the cars remained where they were. The crowds hooted and cheered. The two sides faced off like this for a while. The roar of the tanks was always followed by a simultaneous rush toward the streetcars. Then the tanks would retreat and the crowds would cheer again. This happened several times, until the troops began to fire tear gas on the crowds. The tear-gas canisters were shot past the streetcars and exploded among the crowds, who were forced to run for cover. The tank took



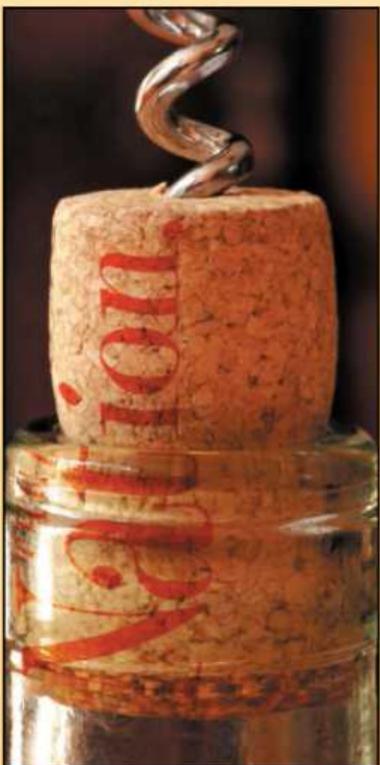


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the opportunity to power ahead toward the streetcars again. There was a terrific crash, and a couple of the cars were crushed, leaving a two-meter gap in the barricade. When the tank reversed so that it could pick up speed for another attempt, thousands of students and other protesters surged forward, pushing the overturned streetcars back to their original position to close the gap, and leaning up against the wall to prop up the swaying vehicles with their own bodies in defense against the tanks."

Zheng Yi again: "In the early hours of June 4th, on Chang'an Avenue, just north of the congressional Great Hall of the People, the crowds began to march eastward, attempting to storm into Tiananmen Square in aid of the students who had been surrounded by troops. They clashed with the army outside the square. Linking arms to form a human wall, they advanced slowly, while singing anthems aloud. Time and again, their ranks would be depleted by gunfire, and they would regroup and continue to press forward slowly. Every time dozens of people fell, others would join in to take their place, so that eventually it became clear that the protesters were engaged in an unwinnable tug-of-war with the army. At dawn, the tanks rolled out of Tiananmen Square and took their positions in a row across the street. They revved their engines and began to advance toward the human wall.

"Suddenly, one reckless protester simply lay down in the street. Others followed, and soon there were several hundred people lying all across Chang'an Avenue.

"Despite the menacing tank treads, no one fled. The tanks lost this first battle of will-power and courage. The first tank screeched to a halt 'so suddenly that the streets shuddered, and the top half of the tank lurched forward.' Eventually, the tanks fired tear-gas bombs at the crowds to disperse them. They then mowed down the protesters who were fleeing the choking yellow smoke, and killed at least a dozen people on the spot. Five young protesters were killed at the southwest corner of Liubuko Junction. Two of them were crushed onto bicycles, their corpses mangled together with the bikes."

The dictators had won. The murderer Deng Xiaoping finally made a public appearance to reward the troops who had succeeded in imposing martial law. Amid the endless rumors, many of the "thugs" were arrested, and several were publicly executed by firing squad. "I was lucky, too," said Wu Wenjian. "I only got seven years. Many of the so-called thugs my age were ordinary workers, peasants, street hawkers, who took to the streets to

resist the army. If the judge decided to convict them of 'property damage and looting' and gave them a harsh sentence, they might spend decades in jail. These were boys who'd never kissed a girl when they were arrested. By the time they were released, they were middle-aged men who knew nothing about society or about women, and had no skills worth speaking of—what could they do? Many have been reduced to sharing the apartments and the pensions of their aging parents. Some of them are afraid to even leave their apartments. Beijing has changed so much, they're afraid of embarrassing themselves by getting lost in their own hometown."

I winced in recollection. I, too, knew the feeling of getting lost in my own hometown. From 2005 on, I spent a few years following Wu Wenjian's lead into the world of these marginalized people who had been forgotten by an economically booming, authoritarian China.

Over the next few years, I began to furtively conduct interviews with the Tiananmen survivors. The harrowing episodes recounted to me in dozens of interviews will never be published, because the victims refused to make them public. On June 4, armed police arrested scores of fleeing protesters, and many people were beaten to death. Of the first eight "thugs" convicted of arson because they had set cars on fire, seven were promptly executed. The only one left was a man called Wang Lianxi, a sanitation worker. He was found to have severe mental disabilities, as a result of which his sentence was commuted to life in prison on appeal. After 18 years in prison, he was released shortly before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Then he was evicted from his apartment like many other Beijingers, as the city forcibly removed thousands in preparation for the games. Wang Lianxi ended up homeless and was eventually sent to a mental hospital. Those who knew him said that Wang had been sleeping on the streets and scavenging in dumpsters for food.

Another man called Lu Zhongqu, who'd also committed property damage by setting cars on fire, was nearly beaten to death by incensed troops. "We saw the soldiers drag him into a tank and take him directly to a detention center," Wu Wenjian said. "By then, he'd already lost his mind—either he was mentally unstable to begin with, or the beating had driven him mad. He was covered from head to toe with bruises. He also had no bowel or bladder control left, and he would just pee in his pants. He walked around in his own world, and spoke to no one. He eventually disap-

peared, just like Tank Man, and no one knows what became of him."

Almost no one I interviewed was willing to speak publicly about sex. That said, among former prisoners who are single men, the conversation inevitably turns to women. Many of the men I spoke to couldn't stop talking about sex. Only afterward would they suddenly realize that the recorder was on, check themselves, and tell me that their outpourings were not for public consumption.

There must be tens of thousands of people all over China who were arrested after the 1989 protests: In Beijing alone, thousands were arrested. Many of them were teenage boys, virgins, like Wu Wenjian. Having spent years or even decades in jail, many suffered from various forms of sexual dysfunction.

Upon their release, they were middle-aged men dealing with erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculation, and their recovery often took months or years. Wu Wenjian, whose sentence was relatively short, said that his erectile dysfunction lasted at least two years. "I was an art student, and not long after being released from prison I found a job in an ad agency, so I was doing well compared to the other June 4 thugs," he said. "I often traveled for work, so I would be staying in hotels and frequenting places full of sexy women. But I couldn't get it out of my head that the police might still be following me and could catch me in the act. My first kiss was a disaster: I managed to crack the skin on her lips, and as soon as I put my arms around her I came, which gave me a huge wet patch on my pants. I was nervous and extremely horny, but the hornier I got, the less I could get it up. That lasted all night. The girl was patient, and she kept stroking me and comforting me, but I was on the verge of tears, and I just wanted to slap myself in the face. Eventually she left and never came back."

"That's what happens when you've been sexually starved for such a long time," I said.

Wu said, "Every time I saw a girl who was even a little sexy, I would feel the urge to walk up and strike up a conversation—but then I would worry about not being able to perform. In Chongqing, I managed to pick up a girl who worked at a hotel. She had real nice boobs. We sneaked into a room and started making out. She clung to me, her legs wrapped around my waist. I couldn't hold it in, and seconds later I came. Damn it! She was really turned on, and I was done. She shot me a derisive look. We tried halfheartedly to keep going, and I was sort of feeling it, but as soon as we tried again, I realized it wouldn't work. 'Piece-of-shit loser!' she hissed."

"That was worse than what the Communists did to you, right?"

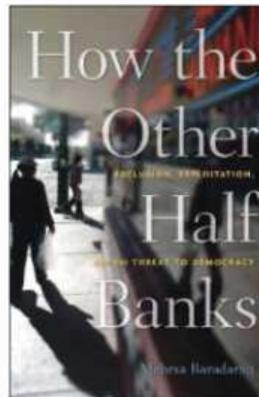
"If we're losers, then how about the officials, tycoons, yes-men, and sellouts? What did we do to land in prison, and what were you doing that whole time on the outside—whoring with your ill-gotten gains? And when you've made enough money and whored enough, you figure you can call us losers... is that right?"

"It's true, times have changed."

"No, it's me, really—I've become a freak. If I can't perform, I can't be wallowing in self-pity and blaming the girls. Recently, Kun and I were hanging out at the Front Gate in town, not long after his release. It was sunset, and we were having fun people-watching. Then a girl with long hair walked past us, trailing a faint scent of perfume. A hot piece of ass. I said nothing—I've been on the outside for long enough to have seen everything a man could possibly want to see. But 40-year-old Kun, who had once leapt up onto a car to make speeches while bullets whizzed past him, looked at her as though he would grab her ass with his gaze if he could. No ordinary person can imagine that degree of sexual craving. When the girl walked away, Kun collected himself and whispered to me: 'Wu, I can't get it up anymore.'"

I met Kun once. Wu Wenjian tried to talk him into giving me

Harvard

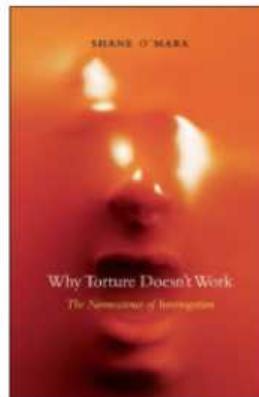


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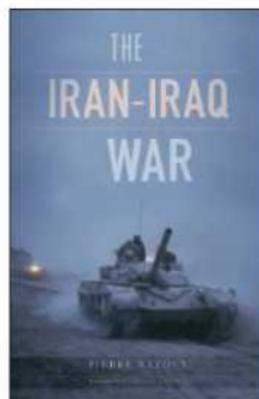


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TRANSLATED BY NICHOLAS ELLIOTT

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—Bartle Bull, *Wall Street Journal*
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an interview, but he declined. Kun had been honorably discharged from the army. He was a real patriot. The night of June 3, he was at Muxidi Bridge, the exact place that Zheng Yi described in his recollections—in fact, he'd been one of the people directing the crowds from a height to collectively resist the tanks. He was later betrayed to the military police, convicted on charges of subversion, and given a death sentence that was later commuted to life in prison. His wife left him not long after, taking their child with her. By the time he was released, years later, he was single and living with his 80-year-old parents. “It’s hard finding a job,” he said. “If my boss finds out you’ve interviewed me, I’ll be fired right away.”

“What kind of job do you have?”

“My first job involved standing outside big department stores, watching their customers’ bicycles. It paid next to nothing. Out on the street on snowy days, I’d be constantly stamping my feet so as not to be frozen into a pillar of ice. Then my friends pulled some strings to get me the job I have now, working in a public bathhouse as a janitor. I clean toilets day and night, but at least it’s a stable income. In the ‘80s, we learned from the movies that nightclubs are shady places full of playboys and bad guys. In the ‘90s, as restrictions on the free market became looser, so did the morals of the hostesses at nightclubs, so that was what you were looking for if you went to one. In the first years of the new millennium, nightclubs went out of fashion. Now bathhouses are the new thing. Drinking, karaoke, mah-jongg, bathing, full-body massages, foot massages, back massages, hand jobs... We’ll satisfy the full range of the customer’s desires. You might think it’s not your thing, but let’s say you’re half-naked, a hostess comes into the room and starts giving you a massage. Then she works her way down to your thighs, groin, and starts playing with you. You think you wouldn’t get hard?

“In that den of vice, I’m just the janitor who cleans the toilets. When the fat cats and magnates come in with girls hanging off their arms, I stand respectfully to one side and hand them paper napkins. In the 1989 student movement, we ordinary people supported the students because we were sick of corruption. We wanted the top Communist officials to disclose their side income and private assets. We wanted a fresh start for our country. Government officials are still in league with big business, while ordinary folks can barely make ends meet. Society is suffering from a crisis of trust. Those of us who paid the price for supporting Chinese democracy are left waiting on the fat cats.”

“I feel for you, Kun.”

“Once, two businessmen came into the toilet. Neither of them was wearing a shirt. They actually recognized me: ‘Hey, it’s Kun, isn’t it?’ one of them said in astonishment. ‘I’m your old neighbor Hai. We were both there resisting the tanks on the night of June 4, remember? I got lucky and slipped away in the crowds. They had no proof that I’d taken part in the protests, and I denied my involvement strenuously. Eventually I got away with nothing more than making a self-criticism at work. Then Deng Xiaoping made the 1992 tour of South China that signaled

economic reform. It was getting too costly to be patriotic, so instead we all responded to the Party’s call like good Communists and went into business instead. I work in food processing, and you don’t ever want to know how that sausage is made. I’ve made a fortune selling dead pigs as live ones, so to speak. As long as you never breathe a word of 1989, never reopen those old wounds, you can keep making money. Kun, it’s too bad you’ve come to this. Back then, you were literally on top of the world! There’s no predicting what will happen to anyone.” ■

The Revolutionologist

by THOMAS MEANEY

Being anywhere on the left has always been a minority position in American society, but Michael Walzer has typically been cheerful about his place on the margin. He defines himself as a “connected” social critic in the mold of Albert Camus, George Orwell, and his mentor, Irving Howe. By “connected,” Walzer means something different from the more French-inflected “engaged,” and the contrast he draws with “alienated” is explicit. Connected critics, Walzer maintains, argue from the edge, but not from the outside. They do not burn constitutions; they offer amendments. They speak in the idiom of their fellow citizens and remind them of the ideals they have failed to live up to. They write not out of anger but disappointed love.

For more than half a century, Walzer has lovingly shamed America in this fashion, most notably through his stewardship of *Dissent* magazine, which has incubated social-democratic political alternatives since the Cold War. Too young for the trials of McCarthyism and too old for the Vietnam draft, Walzer is the inheritor of a segment of the left that still prides itself on its midcentury blend of anticommunism and social democracy. In public, Walzer still gets chuckles from mainstream audiences when he says, with practiced weariness, that he “lives on the left” or mentions “the left, which is where I live,” as if he were confessing to some unfashionable zip code.

But view Walzer from any another angle, and he appears to be at home in the political center. He is one of the immortals at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton;

The Paradox of Liberation

Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions.

By Michael Walzer.
Yale. 172 pp. \$26.

he is the pinch-hitting social democrat for *The New York Review of Books*; he appears on *Charlie Rose*; he is read at West Point. These are not typically radical havens. In his work as a political theorist, Walzer’s most important writings orbit prominently inside the ever-expanding galaxy of communitarian provisions to John Rawls. He periodically inspects the exports of European theory—Foucault, Negri, Zizek—and marks them “return to sender.” In his mode as a judger of wars, Walzer is often as impatient with the mechanical anti-imperialism of leftists—he prefers to put “imperialism” in quotation marks—as he is with the humanitarian hypocrisies of liberals.

In some sense, Walzer embraces this dual political character. He thinks that liberalism, without regular utopian injections, is doomed to abandon any commitment to social progress; but that without liberal limits, utopian aspirations threaten to bring about catastrophes worse than the ones they seek to mitigate. In other words, radicalism and liberalism need each other. This is hardly an original or clarifying political position, but Walzer has always displayed a certain distaste for the business of taking political positions, while at the same time taking them constantly. And so, when Walzer says that he “lives on the left,” it is not always clear what address he is giving.

The question is more urgent and interesting now that the flock has separated from the shepherd. It is hard to say just when Walzer went from being treated by

Thomas Meaney last wrote about Francis Fukuyama for these pages.

his comrades as America's leading social-democratic thinker to an ever less gently tolerated avuncular presence. Many otherwise-sympathetic adherents of Walzer's left-liberal blend like to whisper that much of his work amounts to a justification of Israeli policies. But this *reductio ad Zionism* satisfies a craving for coherence by positing a consistency in his thought that isn't quite there. Certainly, the growing distance between Walzer and the left where he has lived is due to competing claims between social justice on the one hand, and communal solidarity on the other. In order to maintain its credentials, *Dissent* recently had little choice but to run a rebuttal to one of Walzer's pieces in its own pages. That particular contretemps was about the relationship between the left and Islamism, but it runs much deeper. The acrimony of the exchange and the melancholy tone of Walzer's response went beyond the pitch of a family quarrel. At its root, it is a conflict over the nature and autonomy of modern politics and its most extreme expression: revolution. For Walzer, any talk of revolution and its export necessarily includes a reckoning with the use and abuse of American power in the world.

Fear of revolution was the most primal instinct of American foreign policy in the decades in which Walzer came of age. In its attempt to stabilize a postwar world order it had largely designed, the United States used the Marshall Plan in part to stanch partisan revolutions ignited by the defeat of fascism in Europe, while preferring more violent means against the revolutions of developing nations, as well as those at home. By the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, the US government's fear of revolution was already being treated as an intellectual failure by some of the country's leading thinkers. As early as 1954, Reinhold Niebuhr worried that the United States was already playing the game of "managing history," as more Third World states appeared to subscribe to the Soviet promise than to American vagaries. Whereas the Soviet Union was equipped with a powerfully lucid philosophy of history that could explain the nation-state as a way station on the road to the universal brotherhood of socialist republics, American policy-makers could offer no such definitive vision beyond a hazy picture of a world of materially satisfied, politically liberal nation-states, connected through capital, with America at once the exception and the model. (Consider: when Harry Truman was tending cows and writing



Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (left) and Vietminh President Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, October 18, 1954. AP

love letters to Bess, Stalin was composing "Marxism and the National Question.") The problem was all the more severe since the United States still saw itself as a revolutionary power, which it hadn't been since the 19th century. Now, in the postwar world order, it occupied an uncomfortable position as a conservative power linked with the vulnerable European empires, against which it still prided itself on being the first rebel.

By the 1960s, Hannah Arendt could go a step further and blame the American fear of revolution on what she took to be a failure of American propaganda. "The failure to incorporate the American Revolution into the revolutionary tradition has boomeranged upon the foreign policy of the United States," she wrote, "which begins to pay an exorbitant price for world-wide ignorance and for native oblivion." It was an ongoing embarrassment, argued Arendt in *On Revolution*, that Third World revolutionaries knew the texts of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions by heart, but appeared never to have heard of the American ones. (This was untrue: Ho Chi Minh, among many others, was well versed in the American Revolution and the US Constitution.) But Arendt was largely correct in her broader assessment that the Third World had privileged "social" revolution, premised on immediate social justice, over "political" revolution, premised on the legal protection of property and rights. The luck and genius of the American Revolution, as she freely interpreted it, was that it happened in a country with such limitless resources

that it was not fired by resentment against social betters. There was poverty in colonial America, but Arendt could detect no misery. In contrast, she worried that Third World nationalists, by conceiving of their revolutions like the French revolutionaries, out of physical necessity and rage against elite hypocrisy, had opened the door to totalitarianism and violence. The result would be the same as what had befallen the Jacobins, when "necessity invaded the political realm, the only realm where men can truly be free." Or, as Irving Kristol, building on Arendt's argument, put it: "A successful revolution is best accomplished by a people who do not really want it at all, but find themselves reluctantly making it."

But instead of proffering the American Revolution as a model for the emerging nations of the decolonizing world, American policy-makers in the 1950s and '60s rolled out a more all-encompassing program: modernization theory. This was the self-flattering story that explained the labor of decolonization and global capitalist integration as a manageable and inevitable process: the entry of new nations into modernity itself. The theory was consecrated in Walt Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960), an inverted Leninist tract that neatly substituted a liberal end point for history in place of a communist one. By 1968, the leading historian of American liberalism, Louis Hartz, appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and explained that the Third World revolutions were more akin to the birth pangs of Europe leaving the



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Middle Ages than either the French or American Revolution.

In the same year, a young American anthropologist named Clifford Geertz made a more bracing and characteristically ironic argument about the Third World: The new nations emerging from the European empires were faced with the problem that their collective energy was based on opposition to rule by foreign people of a different color, and that this energy would dissipate as soon as formal independence was achieved because all of the former divisions of tribe and class had only gained momentum. Geertz called this the “nationalist paradox,” and he identified two responses to it: the “essentialist” response, which sought to foster a neotraditional sense of common identity in the new nation; or, alternatively, the drive among the new nation’s elites to build up a modern state in mimicry of the colonial metropoles. The two impulses were not mutually exclusive, but for Geertz, as for Arendt, these solutions were momentary psychological balms passing themselves off as deep and lasting change. Their expectations of modernity were a recipe for political disenchantment.

Walzer’s most sustained grappling with the problem of revolution in the 1960s came in the form of his dissertation, which became his first book, *The Revolution of the Saints*. It was a more earnest inquiry into revolutionary politics than those of Arendt (his New York Intellectual elder), Hartz (his teacher), or Geertz (his friend and longtime colleague). Walzer wanted to understand the dynamics of the first modern revolution: the Puritan Revolution of 1642, in which King Charles I of England lost his head and the country’s first Republican government came briefly into being under Oliver Cromwell. At the time, this historiographical territory was thoroughly occupied by British Marxists, who, locked into the concept of “bourgeois revolution,” interpreted the revolution as the overdetermined result of a new ascendant class of small merchants and shopkeepers who could no longer operate effectively within the confines of the ancient regime.

This was not the full story, as Walzer saw it. The men who most contributed to the revolutionary impulse were also fierce Protestant believers who thought they were doing God’s work on earth. In a highly destabilized world of transition, caught between a fading “traditional” society and an emerging “modern” one, this class of Protestant proto-intellectuals was “marked off from their fellows by an extraordinary self-assurance and daring.” They responded to the pervasive sense of spiritual drift around them by forming a new formal, impersonal, ideological covenant that prized commitment to faith over the traditional loyalties to family, guild, and king. They won the confidence of the general population with their undeviating sense of purpose, their rigid self-discipline, and their tireless drive toward purity.

But Walzer showed that in the course of their revolt against the old order, the Puritans not only stumbled into the new world of politics, but in so doing revealed what politics originally was: a new kind of earthly labor, to which the chosen were required to commit themselves for long periods of time. It was a worldview that abandoned the boom-and-bust paradigm that saw nations and peoples guided by divinely determined periods of rise and decline; instead, politics was a mortal enterprise devoted to cultivating and constantly reforming the beloved community. In other words, Walzer had gone in search of the origins of politics and found, already existing in the middle of the 17th century, a vanguard. In the English case, this vanguard had fallen by the wayside, and during the Restoration period that followed, many

of its ideas and practices—the most decisive being overseas imperialism—were adopted, while the ideological dimension of their project subsided. Something like secular politics was left behind. This was the most beautiful aspect of the English for Walzer: Their vanguard was the brittle cocoon for the larvae that metamorphosed into modernity.

It is hard to avoid the impression that in *The Revolution of the Saints* the young Walzer was engaging in a favorite Marxist pastime of previous generations: posing counterfactuals about the Russian Revolution, in this case whether it might have succeeded in birthing a better society if only the Bolsheviks had gone the way of the English Puritans and either recognized their short-term purpose and gracefully exited the scene, or been forced out by the majority of the population. In 1979, in “A Theory of Revolution,” his last published essay in a Marxist journal, Walzer returned to this theme and argued that his favored outcome would have been a Thermidor, in which “the revolutionary class”—the majority of the oppressed people in society—“resists and replaces the vanguard and slowly, through the routines of its everyday life, creates a new society in its own image.” And what happens to the vanguard? They were to be reabsorbed “into the social roles occupied by their parents, that is, into professional and official roles without any special political significance.” For Walzer, the preferred outcome of the Russian Revolution would have been a freshly modernized Russian people reclaiming the power of the state through the soviets in 1920 or thereabouts, while Lenin and Bukharin returned to work as high-school principals.

At the time Walzer was writing *The Revolution of the Saints*, there were, of course, more pressing “transitional” societies in view than the Puritans and Bolsheviks. These were the peoples of the decolonizing world, who—faster than anyone had anticipated—were coming into their own as “new nations.” The excitement over this world development among both American liberals and leftists is difficult to overstate. Arendt found something to admire in the Cuban Revolution, as Geertz did in Nasser and Senator John F. Kennedy in the Algerian rebels. The charismatic heroes of the Third World seemed to promise a heady combination of radical nationalism, Cold War neutrality, collective opposition to Western imperialism, and “Great Leap Forward” material progress. There was a

brief, ambivalent moment in which many American liberals were willing to overlook the fact that few national-liberation movements were democratic, and that many were engaged in armed struggle.

“What happened to national liberation?” is the question that Walzer sets out to answer in his new book, in which he returns to his original calling of revolutionology. It is a question worth posing: What happened to the dreams of the secular anticolonial nationalists who forged the new states out of the European empires? A large number of these states were founded on state-socialist principles and contested American con-

ceptions of “self-determination.” Yet look around the world today, Walzer says, and see how many of these states seem to have reverted back to ethnic and religious politics, led by cultural chauvinists. The lions of early decolonization—Nehru, Nasser, Ho Chi Minh—were replaced in the 1970s by a group of more parochial leaders: Indira Gandhi, Suharto, Lê Duan. Now many of them have been challenged or succeeded by religious chauvinists: the Bharatiya Janata Party in India, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, Yisrael Beiteinu in Israel. The “backward” practices and mores that the original anticolonial generation allegedly



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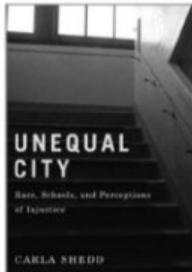
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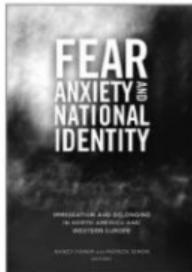
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thought they were consigning to the past have returned, if anything, in more virulent strains.

Walzer examines three cases in detail: Algeria, India, and Israel (the one with which he is most familiar). The main thrust of his argument is that the anticolonial vanguard in each of these states made a critical error of judgment that became an impediment once the euphoria of independence subsided. They were too strenuous in their attempts to make “new men” out of their people, and rushed too fast without doing what Walzer has been doing in his many books on Judaism: critically engaging their own traditions in a search for radical openings still possible within or alongside tradition. “The early liberationists believed that their struggle had a singular and certain end,” Walzer writes. “But the critical engagement with religious beliefs and practices is liberating in a new way: now the end is open, radically uncertain—or, better, there are many different engagements and many different, always temporary, outcomes.” Instead of plunging headlong into some imitation of Soviet or American or West European modernity, the liberationists—Nehru, Ben Bella, Weizmann—should have consulted more with the saddhus, imams, and rabbis.

Walzer has always been more inclined to psychologize than to historicize, and *The Paradox of Liberation* is no exception. But even here, the psychologizing of Third World national liberation is overly tidy. Walzer charges each anticolonial founding generation as guilty of wounding the traditional fabric of society; then, decades later, the traumatizing error returns to haunt future generations. He believes this is what happened in Algeria in 1992, when the original anticolonial founding party, the National Liberation Front, was unable to accept the likely victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in a general election, and ignited a decade of civil war.

The problem in this case, as in his others, is Walzer’s hydraulic view of history, summed up in his blithe phrase “then the backwardness came back.” In his view, the animating forces behind “religion” and “tradition” in the new states entered into the wilderness for a few decades, never much registering the impact of global forces, until they suddenly returned in their societies in magnified form, ready to take advantage and control of the democracies they had only a small part in creating, except as a storehouse of anticolonialist sentiments. This picture is further distorted by Walzer’s inattention to two issues: the more concerted efforts on the part of the Third World, once it began to suspect that “national liberation” was a chimera in an age of global capitalism, to counter or reform global capitalism through institutions such as the New International Economic Order; and the missed global political opportunities, as in the oil crisis of the 1970s, which were squandered when the Arab members of OPEC decided to funnel their profits back into Western financial markets instead of more radical investments. By peering at national stories only through national lenses, Walzer glides over this thwarted Third World project, the failure of which sapped local support for national liberation and replenished hopes for more religiously grounded alternatives.

But perhaps the most surprising omission in *The Paradox of National Liberation* is its lack of puzzlement over how antique the phrase “national liberation” now sounds to our ears. No one talks much today about the idea that Walzer is trying to rescue—and for several reasons. One is that the predominant understanding of national liberation in the period of decolonization was much closer to the Soviet definition than to Walzer’s: It was a historical process that entailed an immediate break from colonial rule. But

Walzer means something more by “liberation” than simple formal independence. He means the perpetually renewable liberation of the nation and the people, the never-ending process of remaking themselves as citizens. Arendt, too, was preoccupied with this problem in *On Revolution*, in which she returned to Jefferson’s meditations on the same subject. How, she asked, once the revolution is completed, does one keep its spirit alive? For Arendt, who was fixated on the Hungarian councils that sprang up in revolt against the Soviet invasion of 1956—at least until they became tainted by anti-Semitism—the answer was some kind of small-scale political commune where the exercise of political talents could be constantly refined and issues worked out in fully civic forums.

But the main reason for the obsolescence of national liberation as a rallying cry has to do with nationalism’s loss of appeal among leftists. Many on the left who cheered the “war for national liberation” in Vietnam turned against the new state when it began persecuting those who became the “boat people.” Soon, national liberation became a tarnished ideal. By the 1990s, separatist groups such as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party had dialed back the use of “national liberation” in their slogans and demands; it suddenly seemed an outdated justification for a splinter state when there was more resonant local language available. The fortunes of national liberation were already dimmed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: The Soviets were always more comfortable with the language of national liberation than the Americans, but here, for many on the left, was a socialist state so outrageously out of control that large numbers of leftists decided that the more just cause was to back the indigenous Muslim forces and fight the Soviets and their state-socialist puppets. The Vietnamese boat people and the mujahideen were only two signs of the global trend that gradually led a significant sector of the left to substitute the ideal of human rights for national liberation. But Walzer appears uninterested in this story.

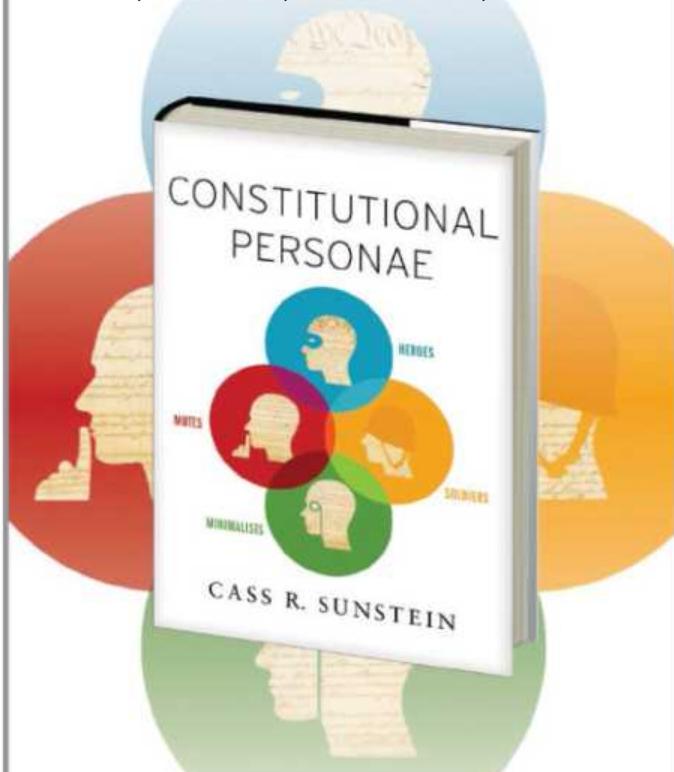
If there is one thing that Walzer has now come out against strongly, it is what he sees as the pusillanimous attitude toward radical Islam in his corner of the left. “I frequently come across leftists who are more concerned with avoiding accusations of Islamophobia than they are with condemning Islamist zealotry,” he wrote recently in *Dissent*. “The Islamic revival is a kind of testing moment for the left.... Some of us are trying to meet the test; many of us are actively failing it.” Those failing it, according to Walzer, are the leftists who “are so irrationally afraid of an irrational fear of Islam that they haven’t been able to consider the very good reasons for fearing Islamist zealots—and so they have difficulty explaining what’s going on in the world.” Walzer has lately discovered the Internet, it seems, and he doesn’t like what he’s found there: not enough worrying about the politics of contemporary religion or about radical Islamist politics. But is insufficient condemnation of such universally despised organizations as the Islamic State really the main problem haunting the left today? The problem is not that Walzer wants US air strikes to stop massacres by ISIS, but that he calls for them in a frame of mind in which America is perpetually faced with upstart Hitlers. Immediate moral and psychological concerns trump any wider moral consideration, so there is never any need to bother with the question of why it is always the United States that gets to cast itself as a savior, while the world’s victims go on being victims.

It is hard to avoid the suspicion that Walzer’s deeper problem with the left today has to do with its willingness to lend a charitable interpretation to any anticapitalist and anti-imperialist force that

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April 27, 1994: South Africa Holds Its First Free Election After the End of Apartheid

happens to be operating in the world, no matter its origins. The newfound affection for Pope Francis among a portion of the left is only the most superficial sign of this. More pervasive is a general sense that religion is one of the storehouses in modernity with a supply of anticapitalist concepts and practices. Not that radical philosophers have been particularly adept at identifying these: In 1978, Michel Foucault notoriously turned in his wings as an academic for a year and tried his hand as a journalist in Tehran, then on the cusp of revolution against the shah. “It is perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems,” wrote Foucault of Khomeini’s rising tide, “the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane.” He was surprised to find the doctor from Tehran, the provincial mullah, the postal worker, and the female student in a chador all forming a “perfectly unified collective will” against the shah. In rather Walzerian fashion, Foucault decided that they were wrestling with their own tradition to find a new way forward. “Religion for them,” he wrote of the Iranians, “was like a promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity.” Marx needed to be revised: “Islam, in the year 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without spirit.”

Walzer never quite tells us how to identify a true insurrection from a false one, but like Foucault he trusts his instinct for detecting authenticity. The stakes of revolutionology are high today, when the lack of discrimination between types of revolution has allowed the word to be applied everywhere from Syria to Libya. The confusion of the left over the Muslim Brotherhood’s recent rule in Egypt is another case in point: It now seems to have been merely an interregnum, engineered to fail (at least in part) by an Egyptian military class that needed to update and refine its dominance after the three sclerotic decades of Mubarak’s rule. But the tentative leftist approval for the Brotherhood would likely have been misplaced even if the latter had had a freer hand. One might argue, with Perry Anderson, that the decolonizing world might have been better off if, instead of superficially interrogating its own traditions and religions, the anticolonial vanguard had vitiated them completely. More appealing was Foucault’s old Marxist antagonist, Maxime Rodinson, author of *Islam and Capitalism* (1966), who argued that the likelihood of a Muslim socialism was small, given that the imprecision on economic matters in Islam’s sacred writing so often played to the advantage of reactionary elites, with their close ties to ministers and interpreters of religion. Yet for Rodinson, Islam was also simply the social atmosphere in which anything happened in the Muslim world—for good or ill—much as Christianity, until perhaps recently, was in Europe. Therefore, to treat it as an insurmountable obstacle to progress, or to be incurious about its possible transformations, was a dangerous form of blindness.

The revolutions of our own time offer neither national liberation nor national renewal. The official US fear of social revolution can, for the time being, be retired: From Kiev to Cairo and beyond, with only a few exceptions, we live in a time of competitive elitisms and pseudo-political revolutions. Each one promises, with ever more effective media, to restore some integral basis for political rights and liberties—to finally and truly represent the people—but turns out to be the messy means for replacing one elite with another. Why and how this has happened is not a question that interests Walzer. Drawing historically obtuse parallels between Christian crusaders in the Middle Ages and the jihadist international of today, as Walzer has made his latest habit, is less than helpful. One hopes for more illuminating offerings from one of the last torchbearers of the “decent” left. ■

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(continued from page 2)

in no fewer than 21 individual indicators, including on factors like maternal mortality, life expectancy, addressing corruption, and fostering religious tolerance. We also highlight where Rwanda is underperforming, including undernourishment, press freedom, and political rights. The full methodology and all of the data for the Social Progress Index are available at socialprogressimperative.org. We would welcome feedback.

MICHAEL GREEN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SOCIAL PROGRESS IMPERATIVE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

DAVID RIEFF
NEW YORK CITY

Crack Up, Fall Down

William Greider's "The GOP Crack-Up" [Nov. 9] really helped explain many of the reasons the GOP is having trouble controlling the far-right wing of the party—a far right that the party's leaders have done everything to foster. What Greider's article leaves out is the tepid response of the Democrats. Instead of calling out the GOP on its "solutions" to issues like healthcare and immigration, they allow it to frame the issues and define key terms, such as "patriot" and "religious freedom." Under the GOP's definition of what it means to be a "true citizen," any government intervention is intolerable, until it comes to social issues like abortion.

If the Democrats really stood up for what they believed in, they would get a lot more support, but the only one really speaking out on progressive solutions to economic and social inequalities is Bernie Sanders.

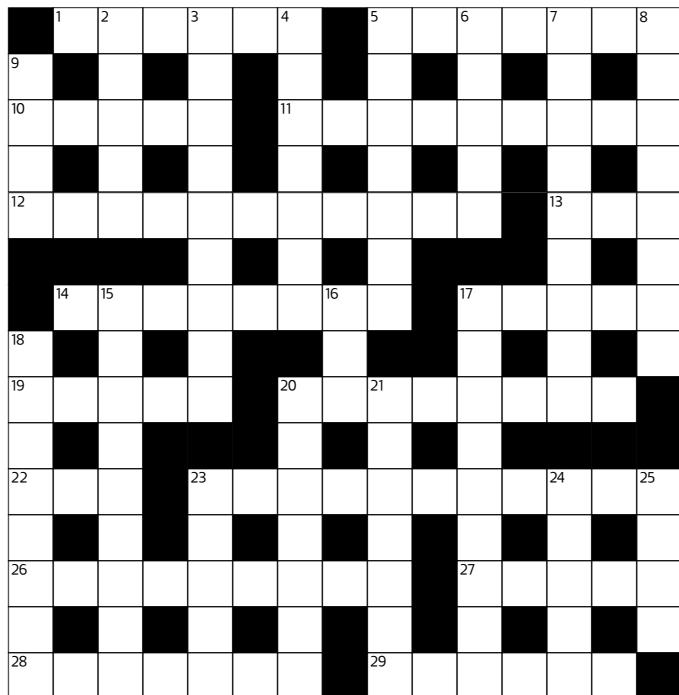
MARY LABONTE
WEYMOUTH, MASS.

Correction

In Emily Wilson's "Shelf Life" [Nov. 9], a printing error caused several references to the fifth century BCE to be printed as ku".

Puzzle No. 3381

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO



ACROSS

- 1** Maude's cracking up laughing (6)
- 5** Makeshift containers flipped about sport organization (7)
- 10** Turner heading to Indonesian island (5)
- 11** Normal representation of a beautiful woman eating a dog (source of vitamins) (4,5)
- 12** Audibly scrape aircraft in part of the Midwest (5,6)
- 13, 16 down and 22** Although revolutionary Communist is brutally killed... (9)
- 14** ...“Soldier’s Return” is included in choral arrangement for one of the powerful few (8)
- 17** Appreciate university during depression (5)
- 19** Search outside of a familiar hangout (5)
- 20** I run after wild pigeon in negligee (8)
- 22** See 13
- 23** They do the unconventional thing when the drinks are on the house? (4,7)
- 26** Traveling guys, or car carrying someone else’s child (9)
- 27** Quick comeback for badass, at first? (5)

28 Mad gene mutated in the final stage (7)

29 Power to blend green and yellow (6)

DOWN

- 2** Rodents eating a bit of nectarine, cut in small pieces (5)
- 3** Close-fitting knit unraveled in view (9)
- 4** Amateur painter incorporates bit of lavender (7)
- 5** Tailless hawk, for example, perches like a hog (7)
- 6** Ocean predators soar freely around canoe’s prow (5)
- 7** Italian general destroyed airbag and lid (9)
- 8** More attractive favorite taking “Introduction to Robotics” class (8)
- 9** Looking up, swallow some tobacco (4)
- 15** Boosted agreement, acquiring subsidiary to put through the wash (9)
- 16** See 13 across
- 17** Pass air through something you might buy at Starbucks with time off (9)
- 18** Ancient rabbinical leader heaps ire indiscriminately (8)
- 20** Opening remarks of official in walk (7)
- 21** Yeltsin, tailored fashionably (2,5)
- 23** Story: “A Talking Vegetable Life” (5)
- 24** Hockey infraction here in Montreal? No good (5)
- 25** Look for date with a thousand dollars (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3380

ACROSS 1 pun 9 M + ARIA 10 anag.

11 letter bank 12 WA + CO 14 F + LYING

15 AS + TERISM (anag.) 17 S(HEAT)HED

(&lit.) 19 PLA(C)ID 22 hidden 23 anag.

26 anag. 27 I + VIES 28 POST + PONE +

MEN + T

DOWN 1 rev. 2 TYRA (anag.) + N + NY

3 FR(A TERN + IT)Y 4 CUT + ESY (anag.)

5 TRAVERS + E 6 hidden 7 WAS + A BI[t]

8 RE + FOR + MED 13 anag. 14 F +

ESTIVAL 16 RE + LEVANT 18 E +

IF + FEL[!] 20 CAP SIZE 21 K + I +

MONO 24 rev. hidden 25 CIA + O



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YOUR HOSTS

Sujatha Fernandes



Sujatha Fernandes is a professor of sociology at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Her first book, *Cuba Represent!*, looks at the forms of cultural struggle that arose in post-Soviet Cuban society. Her most recent book, *Close to the Edge*, grapples with questions of global voices and local critiques in hip-hop, and the rage that underlies both. Fernandes has been published in both academic journals and popular forums, including *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, *American Prospect*, and *Dissent*.

Charles Bittner



For almost two decades, Charles Bittner has served as *The Nation*'s academic liaison, representing the magazine and organizing panels at academic conferences throughout the country. He has hosted four previous *Nation* trips to Cuba and teaches in the sociology department at St. John's University.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Settle into one of Cuba's finest hotels, centrally located along the Malecón, the broad esplanade that stretches for miles along the coast in Havana.
- ▶ Discuss Cuban foreign policy and the coming changes with Carlos Alzugaray, former Cuban diplomat and expert on US-Cuba relations.
- ▶ Enjoy the beautiful Viñales Valley; stay in a private home for one night of dining and interaction with your Cuban family hosts, tour a bucolic private farm, and join the locals for their nightly party in the town center.
- ▶ Explore La Habana Vieja, the oldest neighborhood in Havana, and discover Morro Castle, one of the oldest and most important Spanish forts anywhere in the Americas.
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- ▶ Enjoy private music and dance performances all week long at venues throughout Cuba, and savor the tastes of traditional Cuban food at the island's finest restaurants and markets.
- ▶ AND much more! See the full itinerary at TheNation.com/Cuba.

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